The INN of THE HAWK AND RAVEN

GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/innofhawkraven0000unse_c0f0

THE INN *of* THE HAWK *and* RAVEN

THE INN OF THE HAWK AND RAVEN

A Tale of Old Graustark

By George Barr McCutcheon

Author of

"Kindling and Ashes," "Oliver October," "Quill's Window," "Romeo in Moon Village," "Sherry," "Viola Gwyn," "West Wind Drift," etc.

A. L. BURT COMPANY

Publishers New York

Published by arrangement with Dodd, Mead and Company

Printed in U. S. A.

COPYRIGHT, 1927,
BY DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY, INC.

Published, July, 1927
Second printing, July, 1927
Third printing, September, 1927
Fourth printing, January, 1928
Fifth printing, March, 1928

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	The Daughter of Jonifer	1
II	Gerane Rides Forth by Night	21
III	The Rich Merchant Passeth By	44
IV	A Private View—and What Came of It	66
V	A Glimpse of the World Outside	88
VI	The Three Gypsies	110
VII	Starcourt in the Field	126
VIII	The Land of Jonifer	144
IX	Gerane's Birthday Present	163
X	For Humanity's Sake?	180
XI	The Battle of Wits	200
XII	A Lesson in English—and Something Else	220
XIII	Counsel from All Sides	242
XIV	"To My Beloved Enemy"	264
XV	"Eat, Drink and Be Merry"	283
XVI	Beleaguered	300
XVII	Tammas the Cellarer and—	321
XVIII	Gerane's Punishment	343

THE INN *of* THE HAWK *and* RAVEN

CHAPTER I

THE DAUGHTER OF JONIFER

It was Gerane's birthday. Not very many people were aware of it, to be sure, but few as they were they went a long way toward making up the population of the entire world as far as it was known to the sprightly young woman who was turning nineteen that day. Every man, woman and child in the little rock-bound valley knew of it; woodmen and hunters deep in the somber forests; shepherds and goatherds on the slopes; vagabonds and gypsies down the road; and, above all, the robbers and highwaymen who pounced from secret and shadowy places to fall upon the unwary traveler whose journey carried him through and past the gorgeous but sinister Inn of the Hawk and Raven, so named because it was the abiding place of birds of prey and birds of ill omen and so vast that its heights could only be measured by the winged inhabitants of the air.

For the Inn of the Hawk and Raven was no more, no less than the King's Highway through the somber, forbidding Forest of Droon, lying darkly between the frontier and the fortified town of Ganlook on the road to Edelweiss. As a matter of fact, that particular stretch of the King's road began at the northern end of the pass through the barrier mountains, a long day's journey by stagecoach from the hamlet of Balak near the Axphainian frontier, and extended to within a short distance of Ganlook, a matter of seventy odd miles by horse, a scant score as the eagle flies.

In the very middle of the pass, thirty desolate miles from

either end, sunk low in a gorge between towering cliffs that rose sheer and shaggy to a height of many thousand feet, lay the heart of that evil, grimly named Inn of the Hawk and Raven; its arteries and veins, if such they may be miscalled, ran off in all directions, north and south, up and down, in and out through a tangle of wood and rock that seemingly had no end. Woe betide the adventurer who sought to follow or even to find, for that matter, the paths and trails that lost themselves in the steep, dense, apparently limitless forest which clung undaunted to the sky-touching mountains. Out of this tree-clad wilderness, thousands of feet above, bloomed the frozen, wind-swept, sun-kissed snow-caps, fitting tightly upon the jagged, lonely and forever majestic heads that bent neither to God nor man, glorifying the one while disdaining the other. No human foot had ever been set upon these lofty peaks; "so far and no farther," they seemed to say to puny man when he audaciously, valiantly climbed above the clouds only to slink back dismayed by the great white teeth with which the silent monsters greeted him. The eagle alone, of all God's creatures, had found his way to these chilly heights; the intrepid mountain goat, master of the incredible, had shuddered on ledges far below the unconquerable tips, acknowledging defeat immemorial; the sun, the moon and the stars were the only eyes in all creation able to peep over the walls of the Inn of the Hawk and Raven.

And down in the very cellar of this rambling, awe-inspiring inn, through rocky gorge and gentle vale, snarled a turbulent little river, winding its noisy way out of the crowding hills into the serene and fertile plains of Graustark, where weaklings known as men were wont to call themselves strong and hardy because they were made in the image of God.

The highway itself accompanied the chortling, wriggling stream through the mountains. Ages ago it had been built by an indomitable race of men who lacked everything save

the will and the courage needed to accomplish a task that must have seemed impossible. History says that the King's Highway was the work of men who lived in the Sixth Century, but to this day it is as sound and enduring as it was when a toiling generation laid down its rude implements and called the job complete, for it must have needed a generation of brawn to hew the twenty-league road out of the sides of those stupendous piles of earth and stone. To-day, after all the centuries, it still winds without break or a crack through the Pass of the Two Kings, staunch tribute to builders who wrought without the aid of dynamite, steam shovel, crane, motor-truck or any one of the powerful engines that sniff at obstacles in these times of ours. Mile upon mile of its course lay in the vast Forest of Droon, through whose murky shades it tunneled and twisted and writhed in silent torture finally to grope its way out into the sunlight of the great, flat basin that was the principality of Graustark.

Such was the Inn of the Hawk and Raven. Its passing guests, accommodating themselves to the twenty-league journey, slept—if at all—under a roof of foliage, encamped in the glens like gypsies for the night; to bed at dusk, on the move again at dawn. Caravan, stagecoach, horseman and straggler; nobleman and vagabond; ladies of high estate; prince and commoner; soldier and civilian—all of them stopped for the night, whether or no, at the Inn of the Hawk and Raven. For those were the days, not so long ago, when the automobile was unknown and the railway had not yet penetrated the barrier mountains that guarded Graustark on the north. There were wild beasts in the Forest of Droon, savage wolves and bears and mountain lions; sometimes they stole down by night to the King's Highway and went back to their lairs with their bellies full.

But it was not of these skulking prowlers that the traveler lived in dread. If he were lucky enough to be poor he could

afford to travel alone, armed to defend himself against their attack; if he were rich and carried treasure, however, he hurried anxiously through the Forest with a stout bodyguard of men about him. For there were robbers along the King's Highway more to be feared than the beasts of the Forest, bold desperate fellows who appeared from nowhere and disappeared like magic in the same direction after completing their swift enterprise. And it was these daring, will-o'-the-wisp marauders, together with their unsuspected and supposedly honest friends in the mountains, who knew that it was Gerane's birthday and were preparing to celebrate it in their own peculiar fashion—for was she not the daughter of their chieftain, he who ruled not only over them but over the King's Highway as well?

No monarch was more secure upon his throne than was Jonifer Davos in his secret domain among the hills; no king could claim more loyal subjects or braver ones; and no royal household held a princess who could compare in loveliness with this daughter of his.

But alack, save for the half-hundred robbers, their families and their friends, no one in all the world was aware of her existence.

Nevertheless, among these doughty thieves and cutthroats were men who had looked upon the faces of beautiful women in Vienna and Budapest and Edelweiss and St. Petersburg, and it was their boast that the earth never had produced a flower so exquisite as she who bloomed for them alone in the green little valley that nestled unseen and practically unknown in the heart of the everlasting hills.

However, the statement that Gerane's acquaintance with the world was limited to the valley in which she lived calls for modification. It is true that she had never been inside the walls of the Edelweiss, yet more than once she had looked down upon the—to her—enchanted city from some aerie

height; and there had been times when she rode almost to the gates in company with her dare-devil father and cousins. Then, too, she had ventured forth by night from the fastness in the hills, astride the fleetest of steeds, but never with the shadowy rogues whose business it was to collect their toll of gems and gold and human life on the edge of the King's Highway.

She knew the vast Forest of Droon from end to end, from top to bottom; she knew every hunter and woodsman who dwelt therein; their wives and children, their dogs and their beasts of burden; she knew all of its mysterious paths and by-ways, its glens and gorges, and its romping rivulets; and from some hidden cranny she had watched with scornful, brooding eyes while great companies of soldiers from the fortress searched the Forest in vain on more than one occasion for a trace of the little band of robbers whose exploits had become a thorn in the side of the Crown itself.

She had beheld the Regent himself, and dukes and counts and nabobs galore; she had gazed with secret admiration upon resplendent generals and colonels in their black-and-red uniforms; and once she had seen the baby princess and half the Royal Court as they passed along the Highway under the escort of a troop of Castle guardsmen mounted on satiny black horses, armed with sabers and lances and rifles: a jingling, clattering company in the midst of which rolled a golden coach drawn by four white horses in whose wake came a procession of less regal but imposing equipages occupied by drowsy ladies and gentlemen who had spent the previous night encamped in the heart of the Forest of Droon, where, as well she knew (having looked down upon the scene) there had been laughter and song and a feast so aromatic that the little glen was filled with the tantalizing odors of roast pheasants, broiled venison steaks, and strange, delectable savories from the royal larder.

So Gerane had seen something of the world without actu-

ally being a part of it. And having seen so little of it, she was guilty of many a day-dream in which she wistfully pictured herself,—though it must be confessed with a doleful rancor to mar the awakening,—as a princess surrounded by courtiers instead of ragamuffins, riding in a golden chariot instead of on the back of a furtive Arab, living in a castle instead of the thatched, vine-covered hut that always had been her home, dressing in silks and satins and sables instead of in the simple, though picturesque, garments she customarily wore.

But strange to say, she gave no thought to the diadems, the strands of pearls, the emeralds and rubies and sapphires, or the bags of gold that garnish the life of a princess. They meant nothing to her. They were very cheap and commonplace trifles in her estimation.

Were not these things to be had for the taking? What could be cheaper? And were there not chests full of diamonds and pearls and what not in the caverns of the robbers? Had not her father time and again bedecked her with necklaces and bracelets and rings and tiaras till she sparkled with a radiance that would have dismayed any court in the world? All for the entertainment and applause of the men who had scoffed at bullet and gallows and headsman's ax in order to obtain them! No, Gerane did not give much thought to jewels. But she did think a lot about silks and satins and ostrich plumes.

They were planning to celebrate her birthday in a most exciting, and at the same time profitable, way. As luck would have it, a rich merchant of Edelweiss was to pass through the Forest on that very day. He was journeying under heavy guard to the railway beyond the mountains, his objective being St. Petersburg, far to the north, and he was known to be carrying with him a fortune in precious stones, to say nothing of a considerable store of golden coins. Secret agents in Edelweiss had supplied Jonifer with this important information.

The most astonished man in Edelweiss would have been Baron Dangloss, Minister of Police, had any one mentioned to him the names of these conspirators, so high and powerful and close to the throne were they.

No detail had been omitted. The robber chieftain knew all there was to know about the plans and intentions of the excellent merchant; he knew, and his followers knew, that the risk they would have to take in this instance was graver than anything they ever had attempted in all their years of deviltry. But, to a man, they voted in favor of the undertaking; they were hilariously determined that Gerane's birthday present should be the biggest and best that the market afforded, even though it had to be paid for in blood of their own.

A huckster, it seems, had stopped to haggle with a protesting steward at the back gate of a mansion in Castle Avenue; a boatman outside the walls of Edelweiss passed the time of day with the huckster an hour or two later; a farmer who was having his horse shod at the forge a couple of miles up the river came down to the bank and chatted with the boatman while that worthy rested his arms and back; a woodman, far up the road, stopped work to converse with his friend, the farmer; just before nightfall a hunter opened the door of his hut near the yawning mouth of the Pass of the Two Kings, and admitted a visitor in the person of a woodsman of long acquaintance; a little past midnight a hunter dismounted from his tired steed and pounded on the door of a tavern several miles to the east of the King's Highway on the rough dirt road that branched off in the direction of the village of Semlik; he talked for an hour with the hosts of this ancient tavern, two gigantic brothers named Samon and Seege Digman whose forebears, as far back as memory could extend, had conducted this rambling, friendly shelter for man and beast with small profit, but untarnished honor. And by sunrise on the morning of the day preceding Gerane's anniversary word had reached

"Jonifer the Hawk" in his snug, innocent little cup of a valley high up in the hills that a richly laden merchant was to pass along the King's Highway, accompanied by a guard of twenty dragoons from the citadel.

So it was that the fox-like brigands of the Forest of Droon always were made acquainted with news of this character from the very heart of Edelweiss. By means of a system of human telegraph, comparatively slow, but as sure as the dawn and the dusk, messages were transmitted through devious channels from the capitals of Graustark and Axphain to the stronghold of a robber chieftain. Notwithstanding the ingenuity of the police in both countries, the system had been in operation for a quarter of a century or more. Now and then a brigand was taken alive but his lips were as tightly, as resolutely, sealed as those of the men who died in combat. The headsman's ax merely increased the number of dead men who had no tale to tell.

To add to the perplexity of the astute Baron Dangloss and the Royal constabulary, the faces of the robbers who fell into their hands, dead or alive, were those of men they never had seen before; and yet there was not the slightest doubt that they had spent all their lives within the figurative stone's throw of the city itself. The stripping off of narrow black masks revealed features absolutely strange to the authorities. They wore masks not so much to hide their faces as to keep them from becoming familiar through repeated excursions into the King's Highway.

All day long there had been great excitement and an acute state of ebullition in the peaceful little valley. It had been months since the last foray; scores of rich prizes had passed over the Highway without molestation. The brigands had lain fallow, so to speak, throughout the spring and summer months, but they had not been idle so far as other pursuits were concerned. The green bottom of the valley was alive with

industrious tillers of the soil, preparing against the harsh winter that was to come; picturesque shepherds tended their flocks and herds along the mountain slopes; housewives were busy with broods of chickens and geese and turkeys; the miller, the farrier, the cobbler, and others of their ilk, to say nothing of the gunsmith and the sword-maker, plied their trades with zeal; milkmaids, honey-gatherers, berry-pickers, weavers, serenely went about their peaceful everyday tasks; householders patched their roofs, repaired or enlarged their stables and sheds, made their wines, and slept the sleep of the just and honest.

Looking down from on high into this sequestered little pocket, walled in by its stockade of cliffs, an observer first of all would have been struck by a serene picture of toil, prosperity and contentment; this would have been succeeded by wonder, for no matter in which direction he gazed he could not, for the life of him, see how these people got into and out of their valley. They lived, so it appeared, at the very bottom of a bowl whose green or drab sides were at least a mile high with never a sign of an opening anywhere. What he could not have seen, because of the screen of trees, was the deep, narrow fissure created by some mighty convulsion that split the rocky foothills to the south millions of years ago and conveniently neglected to stop it up again. It was through this curiously concealed slit, masked at its outer end in a most ingenious fashion, that the denizens of the glen found entrance and egress to and from an unsuspecting world. And even though he were able to descend into the valley, the keenest of observers still would have been deceived by his pastoral surroundings.

Though possessed of a thousand eyes, he could not have found the cavern in which were stored such crops of precious stones as had been reaped from the King's Highway,—crops lying smug and safe to await the annual pilgrimage of Jonifer Davos, and a few trusted companions to a designated place,

far beyond the hills, where the baubles were exchanged for bags of gold produced and delivered by even greater miscreants who led respectable lives in Vienna and Paris and Berlin and St. Petersburg.

Now at last there was to be a break in the dull monotony. From every house and every field in the glen came men, young and old, to the stable yard behind the long, squat house in which the robber chieftain lived. A half-hundred strong were they, exclusive of the ancients who had seen their day and no longer were fit for the vigorous enterprises of the road.

And there was not a farmer, nor a gardener, nor a shepherd among them, nor was one to be seen in the length and breadth of the valley. A great transmogrification had taken place. The hunched, toiling, stolid figures of men in faded green smocks, bark-woven hats and grimy leggings were no more. Instead, as if by magic, gathered a company of upright, eager, sprightly rascals with glistening eyes, cocked heads and swaggering mien, mounted on sleek, spirited horses that never had been put to the plow, and carrying in place of hoe and scythe and shepherd's crook long-barreled rifles and pistols elaborately chased with silver and gold. They were a motley crew when it came to dress. Nearly all of them wore richly embroidered tunics of startling hues,—red and green and blue and purple according to the wearer's fancy. Slung back over the shoulder of every man was a long black cloak in which his whole gaudy, bizarre person could be, and invariably was, enveloped when he fared abroad. Loose, baggy,—and as a rule dirty,—white breeches came down to and were stuffed into the tops of short, half-length Cossack boots. From every man's girdle or sash protruded the butts of pistols and the haft of a loosely sheathed hunting-knife. Powder flasks and shot pouches swung free from the hips. Some were bareheaded, some wore tight-fitting leather caps, others had wound dark-colored striped or dotted cloths around their heads, the knots hanging down behind like fluttering tails.

There were black horses and bays but no whites, and there was not a spur or a rowel to be seen on a single boot. As well put spur to the deer as to one of these fleet-footed steeds.

Many a mustache that had drooped limply and raggedly for weeks was now subjected to a twisting so fierce and so incessant that it became a very gallant, upstanding thing, indeed. In every man's eye the devil himself was sparkling.

The shades of evening were falling upon the valley. From her deep-set window casement overlooking the stable-yard, Gerane gazed out upon this scene of activity and enthusiasm. Her eyes were pensive, brooding, even sullen; her little hands were clenched. It was plain enough that she was angry, and when Gerane was angry the tempest was something to remember. True, the devastating clouds usually gave way to the sunshine that was hers by nature,—and her smile was also something to remember in spite of its frequency. But when she frowned, which wasn't often, those upon whom it was directed instinctively looked about for shelter even as one seeks protection from a sudden thunderstorm. Not that she even raised her voice in shrill rebuke or descended to such feminine atrocities as scratching and clawing or even slapping,—privileges peculiarly feminine,—no, indeed! Gerane's tempests were not so easily dissipated as that. There were lightning flashes of unbelievable duration in her velvety blue eyes and desolation in the steady fury of her low-pitched voice; strong men quailed and fell back in the presence of her slender, wrathful body; full many a day had been turned into night by the shadows that clouded her lovely face.

Just now her father, the stalwart and redoubtable Jonifer, who feared neither man nor all the beasts of the forest, was given to glancing furtively, anxiously over his shoulder in the direction of the window casement, although he was surrounded by forty or fifty heavily armed rascals who would have reveled in giving battle to a whole regiment of royal troops. And her three cousins, strapping young fellows and fearless, cast ap-

prehensive looks now and then toward the silent house, for they too ingloriously had weathered the tempest alongside their oaklike uncle.

Two ancient serving-women and the devoted governess-nurse, a cultured Austrian lady who had fallen into the hands of the robbers along with Gerane's mother twenty-odd years before, moved about the house like so many frightened mice, fairly tiptoeing from room to room, waiting for the blessed sky to clear and the sun to come out again, which marvelously it could do even in the dead of night.

This state of affairs was brought about earlier in the day when Gerane expressed a desire—it became an intention before she was through with it—to accompany the band on the forthcoming expedition.

At first she had pleaded sweetly and eagerly with her father to be allowed to participate in one of those thrilling nocturnal raids. She had never done anything of the kind and she thought it was about time, now that she was practically nineteen and the daughter of the great Jonifer Davos, than whom there was no braver warrior, no nobler chieftain in the land.

The great Jonifer, however, had put his mighty foot down upon the proposal. He pooh-poohed the idea. He said it wasn't to be thought of for a moment. This wasn't a woman's business. Moreover, he would cut off his right hand sooner than permit his beloved daughter to run the risk of being shot by—aye, he would cut off both hands before—

"But you couldn't cut off both hands," she had interrupted, taking one of them in hers and patting it lovingly. "How could you possibly cut off your left hand if you'd already chopped off the right one?"

(Herewith follows the concluding portion of that memorable discussion.)

"I am serious, Gerane," he said gruffly, scowling his very best.

"Well, so am I," said she. "I've made up my mind to go with you to-night."

"Oh, indeed! Ha-ha! Am I or are you the Jonifer Davos whose word is law from one end of the valley to the other? Pray be good enough to tell me."

"Don't be ridiculous, father. Of course you are the terrible Jonifer Davos," said she, flippantly. "Every one knows it. No one denies it,—not even I. I am the last person in the world who could be mistaken for anything so huge and frightful as my own father. Just look at me,—I mean, look down at me. Look into my eyes, if you please,—not over my head. Where do I come to? Only to your shoulder. No, it would be stupid of me to claim that I am the gigantic Jonifer Davos whose word is law from—"

"I've told you, my girl, that it is out of the question for you to go with us to-night. Never have I listened to anything so silly. Of all the hare-brained, foolish— Good Lord! What in the name of the devil has got into you? You—you are asking me to let you go out with a pack of thieves, spend the night in the Forest and—and take part in a—don't you know there may be shooting and mayhap killing?"

"Didn't I see you, with my own eyes, shoot Peter Schang and his brother last winter when they molested me? Killing is nothing new to me."

"Aye, but they deserved to be shot. They had broken the law. It wasn't at all the same thing as shooting decent, honest soldiers who are trying to preserve it. Where is Matilde? What has become of the woman? What the devil does she mean by allowing you to get such notions into your head? If I thought she was a party to this scheme of yours, I would —where is the woman? Aha! Hiding, eh? Well, we'll soon see what—"

"She isn't hiding," flared Gerane. "She is out there in the kitchen praying. That's the trouble with her. Every time I

want to do something she says I shouldn't, she runs off and begins to pray."

"She ought to box your ears, my lady."

"I should like to see her try it," said Gerane, stiffening.

Jonifer Davos convulsively fingered his mustache. "And so should I," he said with a chuckle. Then very sternly: "Enough of this. You take my breath away. I cannot believe my ears. You, the daughter of Jonifer Davos, and the most precious jewel in all this world, setting out with a band of cutthroats—"

"Didn't you say that I could have anything I asked for on my birthday?" she demanded, tapping her sandaled foot with ominous rapidity.

"Yes, but—"

"Well, please be good enough to live up to your promise. I am asking you to take me with you. You are in honor bound to—"

"Honor?" he shouted. "What the devil has honor got to do with robbing an honest citizen on the King's Highway? And why should you, whom I have brought up with the strictest regard for honesty and virtue and—and I say, why should you suddenly take it into your head to question my honor simply because I refuse to let you become a thief like—" he jerked his thumb toward the throng of robbers gathering in the stableyard—"like that rabble out there?"

"You forget, father, that I am the daughter of their chieftain," said she patiently. "Isn't it high time that I was learning something about the business so that I may be qualified to take your place as leader when the time comes,—although I hope you live forever,—and so continue the noble—"

She was interrupted by a mighty oath, significant of astonishment rather than exasperation. The great Jonifer stared at his daughter, his jaw sagging.

"Wha-what did you say, Gerane?" he gulped, seeing that she had closed her eyes, screwed her lovely face up as if in pain and had put her fingers to her ears.

She opened her eyes. "You heard what I said, father. If you hadn't, you wouldn't have uttered such horrible blasphemy. And that reminds me. I want it distinctly understood that when I step into your shoes—you know what I mean—as ruler of this valley and that rabble, as you call it, the first thing I shall do will be to issue an edict against swearing in the presence of women. I shall set a good example by never using foul or blasphemous language in the presence of men, and I shall—"

"May the good God defend my soul," sputtered the shocked highwayman.

"I should think you *would* ask Him to defend it," she went on, frowning darkly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself for—"

"Never—never in all my life," exclaimed Jonifer, finding his voice, "has any one dared to speak to me in this manner."

"Pooh! I am not afraid of you, father. Every one else is afraid of you but I am not. I never have been afraid of you."

He smiled. "By my faith, I believe you. You are not afraid of anything."

"Oh, yes, I am. I am horribly afraid of mice and beetles, but—but we are getting away from the subject. What time do we start? I shall have to change my dress and—"

Whereupon Jonifer banged the table so hard with his mighty fist that men some distance away shot quick looks of alarm toward the house.

"Enough!" he roared. "You are not going with us. Put that ridiculous idea out of your head. Do you suppose that I have brought up my only daughter to be a thief? No! A million times, no! I have brought you up to be a lady.

Haven't you the sense to see that you are not like the other girls and women in the valley? Haven't I educated you and dressed you in the fashion of a gentlewoman? Have I not made it plain to you that one day, in my own good time, you are to go out and take your place among the fine ladies of the land, richer than most of them, possessing more jewels and finery than any of them? Do I have to tell you again that your aunt will introduce you to the Court at Edelweiss and you will take your place among the nobility of the—now God defend me! You talk of this! How, in the name of the devil himself, can you expect to be a lady of high degree and virtue if you go out with the worst band of cutthroats and thieves and scoundrels unhung to rob people on the King's Highway in—"

"Aunt Katrane is a lady of high degree and virtue, isn't she?" interrupted Gerane, sweetly.

Jonifer gulped. "Of course she is. She occupies a high position at Court. Do not interrupt me. How can you—"

"She is your sister, isn't she?"

"Did I not command you to—"

"And she is secretly in league with you and these cutthroats and thieves and scoundrels, isn't she? And so are her husband and a half-a-dozen other people of high degree and virtue. Bah! They are thieves, just as much as we are. Every one—"

"I forbid you to talk like this! Go to your room at once—do you hear me? Or shall I take you in there and tie you to a—" Here he suddenly bethought himself to explain: "Besides, you are not a thief. How many times have I impressed it upon you that you are different from the rest of us? How many—"

"I am just as much of a thief as you are or Aunt Katrane or Uncle Emlen or—don't I wear stolen diamonds and silks and sables whenever you see fit to deck me out in them?

Plunder, that's what I call it. Stolen goods. You can't make them out to be anything else. Hence I am a robber. I am no better than the rest of you. Everybody in my family is a robber, so far as I know. It's high time, father dear, for me to be getting a little practice in the actual—"

Jonifer strode toward her and lifted a quivering arm. The scowl on his lean, swarthy face gave her momentary pause. "If—if I ever catch you stealing anything, my girl," said he, thickly, "I will tie you to a tree and give you fifty lashes, even though you be my own daughter and the image of your poor mother. She could not help having a thief for a husband but, by all that's holy, I intend to see to it that she does not have a thief for a daughter."

Notwithstanding the fact that Gerane was inwardly moved by his fierce sincerity, she was a dauntless little warrior and stood her ground. "I wish you would remember, father, that I merely asked permission to ride out with you and the men to-night. Just to look on, you might say. I wouldn't any more think of assisting you in the robbing of—"

"Ho! Ho! An innocent spectator, eh? That is good!"

"Well, I am sick and tired of sitting here in this valley without a speck of excitement, without a thrill,—yes, without a *damn* thrill,—year in and year out, world without end, like a tame cat that—"

"Can I believe my ears?" gasped the brigand chief. "You —you *swore*."

"I do it every once in a while," said she, coolly. "It's the only pleasure I have."

"In all my life, I have never heard a woman swear," said Jonifer, wide-eyed. "Gracious God, what would your poor mother say if she could hear you using such vile—"

"Come, come, father," interrupted Gerane, tartly; "unless you wish to hear me swear in earnest,—and I know a lot of good ones,—you'd better give in at once and say it is all right

for me to go out and have a little fun for once in my life. I want to see just how my fortune is being accumulated. I shan't get in the way, I promise you that. I will keep in the background and, if the worse should come to the worst, I will be the very first to start for home as fast as Selim can go, and you know as well as I that there isn't a horse in all the world swift enough to catch him. What time do we start?"

For answer, the great Jonifer, whose word was law and whose voice was generally supposed to cause the hills to tremble and all the beasts of the forest to put their tails between their legs and scuttle for their lairs,—for answer, that terror of the King's Highway looked long and hard at this incomprehensible slip of a girl who faced him, shook his head in speechless anger, and walked to the window. There he waited until he was sure that he had his voice under control,—indeed, he tested it a couple of times by inarticulate mutterings,—and then called out to his three nephews:

"Peter! Joseph! Matthew! Come here at once!"

The three young men broke away from their comrades and hurried to the house. They were tall, wiry young fellows, fierce looking now as soldiers of the road; ordinarily they were anything but fierce in appearance. Peter, the eldest, was twenty-three, Matthew was barely nineteen, while Joseph came in between. They were the sons of Joseph, Jonifer's half-brother, who was killed many years before in an extremely profitable visit to the King's Highway. They were the sole support of their mother, dividing with her their share of plunder, besides tilling her little farm, tending the flocks and herds, storing up fodder, fruit and cured meats, and listening to her advice on the subject of marriage. They admired but secretly resented Gerane. She alone stood between them and possible succession to the "Throne." They

would have liked to marry her,—that is severally,—but a certain outspoken snobbishness on the part of Jonifer intervened. He made it very plain to them as well as to other young men in the valley that he had something better in mind for Gerane than marriage with any of these disreputable rakehells. Moreover, he was particularly opposed to his daughter marrying a son of Joseph's harlot, who, it appears, was of the commonest sort of stock, being the daughter of an uncouth woodchopper and a half-savage mountain girl. Jonifer had never forgiven his half-brother, who, by the way, was himself a bastard, for not marrying the wild, buxom girl who hurriedly became the mother of his three sons and perhaps would have given him several more if he hadn't been shot in time to prevent.

"Give heed to your bloodthirsty cousin," he announced sarcastically, "and shiver in your boots. Hark to the voice of thunder that puts the lion's roar to—"

He got no farther than this. Gerane's temper broke its bonds. As Peter afterwards said, she did not speak in tones of thunder nor put the roar of the king of beasts to shame but he would like to see the lion that would not have shrunk back trembling before the blazing fury in her eyes. Aye, they flashed blue lightning, added Matthew. Joseph confessed to a decided shivering in his boots. Even Jonifer's mighty battlements crumbled in spite of a heroic but vain resistance. And finally, after she had spitted them all upon the sword of her wrath, she retired from the field of battle, her chin high, her nostrils quivering, leaving the four stalwarts to stare for many seconds in unexampled dismay at the curtained doorway through which she passed.

Jonifer the Hawk mopped his forehead.

"We gave heed to her, uncle," ventured Peter, but he took good care to lower his voice.

"And we shivered in our boots," declared Joseph, grinning.

"A most damnable shrew," blustered Jonifer. "Ho, Matthew,—where are you going?"

Young Matthew was edging toward the door. "Did you not hear her order us all to get out of the house?" he muttered.

"Aye, that I did," said Jonifer, squaring his shoulders. "But I will soon show her that she cannot give orders to her father. The damned wench! Aye, even though she be my daughter, she is a damned little wench! I will break every bone in her body if she does not get down on her knees and—"

A cool, imperious voice from beyond the curtains interrupted him.

"I am starting to change my clothes. See to it that Selim is saddled at once, father. Your damned little wench is going to ride him to-night."

CHAPTER II

GERANE RIDES FORTH BY NIGHT

DARKNESS settled down upon the valley with the swiftness, the suddenness of all mountain nights. Lanterns danced about a big stable yard in jerky, unrhythmic swirls and skips and hops, scattering their shifting beams as they bobbed in and out among what appeared to be a thicket of legs surmounted by a turbulent, conglomerate huddle of foliage. Horses over against the fence at the far end of the lot stamped with increasing eagerness and impatience. A ceaseless, steady clamor of deep male voices, an occasional burst of laughter, snatches of song that chilled the blood with their wild, savage cadences, the swish and tread of a hundred boots upon hard, dry ground,—all these sounds came to Gerane, who still sat at the window, her chin in her cupped palms, her stormy eyes fixed upon the fantastic, Walpurgis-like scene. They followed the towering unmistakable form of her father as it moved among the lesser figures; they watched and waited for sight of black Selim, the horse she would have recognized in a herd of a thousand; and her heart thumped painfully under a strange combination of despair and defiance.

She was by no means sure that her ultimatum, such as it was, had had any effect whatsoever upon her father. As a matter of fact, she was beginning to feel quite certain that it had not impressed him at all.

There was not the slightest indication of weakening on his part. If she could only catch a glimpse anywhere of Selim, saddled and bridled, her spirits would have soared, for that could have meant but one thing. But the horse was not

to be seen. And the band was making ready to mount and ride away. It looked extremely dubious. Nevertheless, she was determined to follow on behind, whether or no; once she reached the Highway they would not dare to turn her back. Even Jonifer, though his curses went to high heaven, would be confronted by such a dilemma that he would be forced to accept her unwelcome company.

Out in the little meadow at the front of the house could be heard the shrill chatter of women's voices. Gerane had listened scores of times to this excited, complaining chorus; the wives and mothers and sweethearts of the men who were venturing forth to make sport of death. The farewells had been said long ago. Now was the time for prayers and God-speeds! These women never hesitated to pray to God on such occasions as this; it was no uncommon thing to hear supplications of this nature as the men rode cockily away:

"God be with you!"

"May the good God watch over you!"

"Oh, Father in Heaven, be kind to my brave man!"

One would have been justified in suspecting these cut-purses to be crusaders in the service of God, so fervent were the unconsciously ironic appeals that attended their departure. The first squad of riders clattered out of the stableyard and swept down into the black pasturelands that lay between Jonifer's house and the defile a mile or so to the south. Presently a second group departed and then another. A dozen men were left to bring up the rear.

Gerane knew by experience that her father was at the head of the first detachment. He was sure to be in the lead. That was his right, his prerogative, even his boast. Never within her memory had the robbers gone down to the Highway except at the heels of their chieftain.

She also knew that the rear guard would be in charge of no other than Julius "Broadaxe," the blacksmith, fiercest and

strongest of all the men in the valley. He came by the soubriquet honestly (although his generously forgotten family name was Snook), for had not he severed a four-inch sapling with a single blow of his mighty ax?

Gerane liked him. Many a time had she sat upon an upturned keg in his forge watching with fascinated gaze while this grimy, hairy Hercules wielded his massive sledge or pumped life from the bellows into the bed of apparently dying coals, causing them to blush red and emit angry, spiteful snappings before sinking back again into the repose from which he had roused them with the snout that never came near enough to be scorched.

She loved the music of the anvil and the spray of red-white stars that spurted from the metal with each bang-bang of the hammer; and sometimes she added her shill treble to his cavernous bass in the song that shook the very rafters of the smoke-scented smithy.

And yet Julius, for all his prodigious strength and appalling reputation as a handler of axes and sledges and men, was known to be the most thoroughly intimidated husband in all the range of mountains. He had a very small wife and she had a very small thumb, but what there was of it sufficed to cover poor Julius, completely widespread as he was. No one joked him about it, however. Drunken Ulrich tried it once and it is of record that he remained sober ever afterwards, espousing total abstinence because of the grave perils accompanying the cup that cheers. The brawny Mr. Snook would have turned up his nose at Ajax's defiance of the lightning if he ever had heard about it; he would have said that *any* body could shake his fist at a bolt of lightning— But we are digressing.

Gerane knew that "Broadaxe" was fond of her; she knew that he would lay down his life for her; she also knew that if he caught her following him down into the defile he would

pluck her from Selim's back, tie her to a tree and leave her there until the band returned in the morning. He was, above all things, loyal to Jonifer the Hawk. But if she once succeeded in squeezing through the mysterious opening at the bottom of the fissure and gained the road outside,—well, she could laugh at him then. Only she would not laugh at him. She would feel very sorry for him because of the black misery that was sure to fill his soul. And she would tearfully promise to stand between him and her father when the latter prepared to slay him for his carelessness.

So as soon as Julius and his little troop of horsemen were safely on their way across the fields, she hurried from the house and made her way to the stable. There was nothing stealthy or furtive about her progress. She carried a big brass lantern which swung tipsily at her knee, revealing a pair of trim, shapely legs encased in the snug-fitting nut-brown hunting trousers she was wont to wear when climbing or riding the forest hills in quest of game. Her half-length boots, reaching but little above the ankle, were of soft, serviceable buckskin, the product of many days' work on the part of old Barnabas Hutch, the cobbler, who, having lost both feet by freezing when he was scarcely out of his teens, had spent the succeeding forty years of his life in the somewhat ironical profession of supplying and repairing footwear for his friends, and who, because of his liking for the chieftain's daughter, had embroidered the tops of her boots with gold braid taken from the uniform of a plundered duke. The long brown cape that mantled the upper part of her body was caught up over her free arm so as not to impede her progress in walking. It was reversible, the inner side being of scarlet; she always "turned her coat" to serve as a safeguard when beating the dense thickets with huntsmen all about her. Underneath this was a long, skirted blouse of dark green, belted at the waist, and reaching just below her hips. A bejeweled scabbard contain-

ing a short-sword (likewise taken from the unfortunate duke) hung at her left thigh, while a richly ornamented pistol grip protruded from her belt on the opposite side,—a weapon so long and so enormous that it appeared ludicrous on her slim person. Her abundant, curly brown hair, coiled closely about the crown of her head, was hidden by a jaunty black hat, peaked in front and turned up at the back. The red feather that customarily adorned it was missing to-night, however.

She was but a few yards from the long, low horseshed when she heard running footsteps behind her. Instantly she whirled to face the pursuer, confident that here was some old grandfather who had been instructed to restrain her if she attempted to follow. She wasn't afraid of grandfathers! Not she! She knew a half-dozen or so in the valley; they were decrepit, rheumatic old blowhards who—

"Gerane Davos!" panted a woman's voice, "what in heaven's name are you thinking about? Do you mean to say you intend to start out after those men—"

"Oh, it's only you, is it?" exclaimed Gerane, allowing the short-sword to slip back into the scabbard. "You made noise enough for a man. Don't bother me, Matilde. I haven't a second to waste. I don't want them to get too far ahead."

"Oh, my dear,—my dear," wailed the distracted Matilde. "You are never going to do anything so rash, so foolish—"

"Damn!" broke in Gerane furiously, holding the lantern on high and peering toward the house. "Eljie and Rosa too! Go back to the house, all of you,—do you hear me?"

Two wheezing, dumpy women came waddling up and halted beside the tall Matilde. They were both mumbling prayerful ejaculations and wringing their hands. Gerane, her legs spread, her heels planted firmly as if determined to resist their combined assault, jerked and tugged at the pistol. She would not have shot one of these devoted creatures for all the world,—still a pistol was a pistol and she knew they were

all deathly afraid of firearms. But the accursed thing stuck. She could not get it out. A pretty state of affairs! She snickered in spite of herself.

"God preserve us!" gulped old Eljie. "She is all dressed for—"

"Come into the house this instant, Gerane," commanded the gaunt Matilde. "Take off those clothes and—why, your father will flay you alive if he catches you at this sort of trick."

"She means for you to take them off in the house, not out here in the stableyard," said Rosa, earnestly.

"Oh, I shall take them off in the house, never fear," flashed Gerane, scornfully. "But not till I get back home to-morrow morning. Listen to me! You sha'n't stop me. I am going. Yes, yes,—I know, Matilde, father will undoubtedly flay me alive, but he can't very well do it until after I've done something to be flayed alive for, can he? If he insists on flogging me after it's all over, let him do it."

"He has never struck you in all your life," Matilde reminded her, twisting her fingers.

"Oh, yes, he has. He spanked me twice when I was little, but you never knew anything about it. I promised him I wouldn't tell."

"I was your mother's closest, dearest friend," said the older woman, lifting her chin. "I am not surprised to hear that Jonifer Davos was ashamed to have me know that—"

"We're wasting time," broke in Gerane, turning on her heel. Then, over her shoulder as she hurried to Selim's stall: "You'd better get out of the way if you don't want to be trampled on,—all of you,—because as soon as I get him saddled and bridled we're going to—"

A chorus of wails, exhortations, even threats drowned out the rest of the sentence. The distracted trio stood outside the door, watching her as they continued to pray and protest; not one of them had the hardihood to rush in and put a

stop to her eager, frantic preparations. They saw her throw blanket and high-pommeled saddle upon the back of the excited horse, and draw the belly-band tight; they witnessed her successful struggle to get the bit into the prancing animal's mouth; and they fled in haste as she led him into the open. Ten seconds later, with the swift, lithe grace of a cat, she was in the saddle. She laughed nervously, uncertainly, but with the elation of one guiltily bent on mischief as she settled herself, feeling for the great stirrup with her foot. Selim was swirling and rearing, snorting with eagerness to be off.

"Don't forget to put out the lantern, Eljie," she called out shrilly as she started away. "And, good-by, Matilde. Don't worry. I will come back all right, dearest. To-morrow's my birthday, you know. I wouldn't miss it for anything."

As Selim dashed through the gate, she raised herself in the stirrups, waved the short-sword in gallant flourish and shouted to the group of women gathered at the roadside below:

"Hi! Look out! Make way! Here comes the bold highwayman! Hi!"

An instant later she shot past the startled group and went galloping down the road, an appalling black specter that thundered off into a still blacker night. There were veracious housewives in the crowd who were ready to swear they saw fierce red flames bursting from this horrible apparition as it fled past them. Far ahead, perhaps a mile away,—a few lights danced like jack-o'-lanterns. Gerane knew them to be the lights dangling from scattered saddles. Even these soon would be lost to view, for Broadaxe's riders were nearing the forest-hidden cleft in the mountain.

Many a time she had traversed by day through the length of this appalling crevasse, a matter of two or three miles, and always she had shuddered as she looked up to the thin strip of sky thousands of feet above. It seemed to her, although she knew better, that the opening at the top was so

narrow that one could have stepped across it with ease. As a matter of fact, it was a good hundred feet from side to side,—as wide, indeed, as the floor at the bottom of the long gash which was covered from end to end with rocks and gravel that glistened with a sheen of apparently black moisture, winter and summer. The middle of this passage had been cleared of bowlders many years ago, leaving a fairly smooth gravel road some eight or ten feet wide, the sides of which were heaped high with rocks, tree limbs and débris of like character.

There was a gradual descent all the way from the little valley in which the robbers made their home to a point several hundred yards from the lower end of the slit. Here nature had played another incomprehensible trick. The same mighty upheaval that had split the gigantic mass in twain as cleanly as if hewn with a cleaver, had almost closed up the lower end by tumbling a vast quantity of stone and earth down upon it. But it had left a tunnel through the great pile, with a jagged mouth yawning in the face of the hill at the outer end almost on a level with the far-reaching, peak-girdled plains of Graustark.

This mouth, however, had been skillfully, deliberately concealed a couple of centuries before by the progenitors of the brothers Digman; they had built a stone tower or fort in front of it to be used as a defense against the attacks of once powerful Tartar chieftains, who in those feudal, barbarous days had swept into Graustark from the south and east to lay against the walled City of Edelweiss a siege that lasted several years before the heroic defenders were able to drive the invaders out. Succeeding Digmans ultimately had turned this grim fortress into a stable large enough to accommodate half a hundred horses or cows or whatsoever beast they chose to shelter. To this day it still stands, a squat and gloomy ruin, surmounted by its tumbledown turret from which archers and spearmen

once sent their shafts of death into the vicious hordes swarming up to its walls. At the time of which we write, it was a most unwarlike structure facing a vast stableyard wherein chickens and geese and ducks dwelt in peace with pigs and other barnlot denizens, the property of those honest inn-keepers, Samon and Seege Digman, against whom, God forgive us, there was not so much as a breath of scandal.

Huge slabs of rock, sliding down from the mountain in that mighty upheaval, formed an angry-looking, uneven roof over the two-hundred-yard outlet, and it was by means of this strange subterranean passage that the robbers made their way to and from their stronghold far up in the hills,—an entrance and exit as yet undiscovered by the minions of the law whose most determined efforts to trace the brigands had always been frustrated by what, to them at least, had come to be looked upon as a piece of black magic. Nothing short of magic could account for the manner in which the robbers vanished from the face of the earth. A skillfully, perfectly devised door of considerable dimensions had been fashioned in the rear wall of the stable. This could be opened and closed only by those who were familiar with its construction, and then only from the cavern side. It was a thick, solid section of woodwork so adroitly joined that even the most searching examination would have failed to detect its presence. The gigantic Digmans and their two stable-boys were the unsuspected guardians of this secret doorway; they never opened it except at the command of Jonifer the Hawk.

All this was known to Gerane. Several times she had passed in and out through this square gap in the wall of the stable in company with her father (on peaceful adventures, to be sure), and she knew the difficulties that faced her in the attempt to get through in the wake of Julius Broadaxe. Her only hope, of course, lay in the chance that she might be close enough upon their heels to slip through before the gate—they

called it a gate rather than a door—was closed by one or the other of the ponderous, slow-moving Digmans.

She had always been a little afraid of Samon and Seege, although they were conceded to be good-natured, jovial monsters, if one could believe all that was said of them. They were such huge, bewhiskered men,—real giants were they,—and even when they were merriest there was something about them that always had made her feel that they would like nothing better than to gobble up little girls and lick their bushy chops after the grewsome repast. She had never gotten over the childish belief that they were ogres, such as Matilde sometimes read about in the shivery fairy tales. Big as Julius Broadaxe was, he was barely shoulder-high to Samon and Seege. They were well over seven feet tall; their heads were as big as her body; their mouths were immense and they had very large teeth which they showed when they laughed. She remembered with a thrill of dread the time that Seege playfully picked her up and set her upon the limb of a tree nearly ten feet from the ground as gently and easily as if she were the tiniest babe—and she was a sturdy girl of twelve. And once she had seen Samon put a huge apple into his mouth and crunch it as if it were a cherry. Both of them had arms as big as her legs and their ears,—she was always fascinated by their ears,—were for all the world like enormous lichens, only they were very pink and stuck out considerably farther than lichens usually do from the boles of trees.

She rode at a gallop across the turf of the grazing lands, keeping away from the hard dirt road to prevent the clatter of Selim's hoofs from reaching the ears of the riders ahead. Not more than a quarter of a mile separated them when the last of the bobbing lanterns disappeared from view. She slowed down to a gentle lope, knowing that the sharp descent through the rift, where horsemen usually rode single-file, would require Broadaxe's men to reduce their speed to a trot

or even a walk. Her thumping heart was in her mouth, but her lips were set, her eyes aglow with excitement and purpose; perhaps her knees were clamped a little more tightly than usual to Selim's sides and her legs may have lost much of their gracious suppleness, but if so, eagerness rather than anxiety was the cause.

The moon had not yet risen and only the biggest and brightest of stars were riding in the heavens. While it was very dark, she was able to distinguish the black upright cut in the towering mass ahead. Then, almost before she knew it, she was catching her breath convulsively and shuddering, for Selim had entered the chill gap and was picking his way down the narrow Stygian road.

Here, where the sun itself was denied admittance, a cold damp wind blew even on the sultriest of summer days. Sometimes it wailed and shrieked like a world in distress as it swept through the giant crack in the wall. To-night it was little more than a strong draft through an open window, increasing in force, however, as it was sucked further into the great chimney. It was at Gerane's back. She drew the cloak close about her throat and squinted her eyes into narrow slits in the vain effort to pierce the darkness that lay before her. She had the feeling that she was riding straight into a black wall. Even Selim, who was supposed to see in the dark, moved cautiously, gingerly feeling his way. Close as it was, she could not see his head; his frequent, almost querulous snorts, however, were reassuring, while the fine spray he threw back from his nostrils curiously comforted her.

She did not lose heart. Many a man would have turned back, ingloriously dismayed, but Gerane was the daughter of a chieftain and his blood was in her veins. She would have scorned any impulse to turn tail even if the notion had occurred to her. Nevertheless, she was young and she was very feminine, so she frankly was frightened by the appalling, incompre-

hensible night in which she found herself. Never had she imagined that night could be so black as this, or so grisly,—for now the wind was whispering strange things in her ears and somewhere ahead it was whining.

Fearing that she might fall too far behind, she urged Selim into a trot, risking not only her neck but his nimble legs as well. Several times the horse stumbled and nearly fell; twice he went down to his knees, nearly catapulting her over his head, but on they went straight into the black wall, her ears alert for sound of man or beast, her eyes staring sightlessly ahead on the lookout for the glimmer of lights. More than once she closed them tight, laughing silently but mirthlessly. How silly of her! Eyes were perfectly useless; they might just as well be shut as open.

Now finally, far below, she caught sight of a speck of light that somehow seemed to be as steady as a fixed star. How queer it was to be looking down at a star instead of up! She took a deep breath and spoke sharply to Selim. She knew that star. It was the lantern that the Digmans always hung up at the mouth of the cavern when business was afoot. Once they had forgotten to light that lonely beacon and for days afterward the valley talked of nothing else but the tongue-lashing they had received from Jonifer. It was not so much a guiding light as it was a signal to the robbers that all was well "outside." In other words, if the lantern was unlighted they knew at once that there was a very good reason why the Digmans dared not open and reveal the existence of the secret gate. At such times Jonifer's men wisely refrained from entering the tunnel; it was as if that beamless lantern were in itself a mighty hand held up to check them.

Gerane increased her speed a little. The light grew larger; an ever-widening aura began to form a misty splotch in the wall of night. At last she drew rein and stood stock-still to listen under the great lantern itself. She could hear

nothing save the pounding of her heart and the breathing of Selim. There was no sound of hoof-beats in the cavern that lay ahead of her. Broadaxe and his men had passed through the gate and were now in or beyond the stableyard; perhaps they were already on the seldom-traveled wood-carters' road that wound its rough, uneven way back into the real Forest of Droon.

Off to the left, six leagues distant, ran the King's Highway. She knew by hearsay that a score of unmarked little trails shot out from this wagon-road, darting like so many tentacles into the wooded foothills, and it was over these obscure paths that the robbers, scattering like rabbits if closely pursued, finally returned in their own good time to the Digman stable.

She set her jaw, took a deep breath, and gripping the bridle-rein firmly in one hand, rode fearlessly into the cavern. In her free hand she clutched the long pistol. Truth compels the sorry admission that it wobbled gracelessly.

Presently a dull square of light took shape in the darkness. It was very dim—the merest shadow, in fact,—but she knew that it came from the interior of the stable. The door in the wall was still open; forty-five feet beyond that foggy square lay the stableyard and a short distance farther on the gate that gave upon the much-traveled road to Semlik. Once she was outside that gate she could laugh at the Digman ogres. They could not fly as fast as four-year-old Selim.

Notwithstanding that she was in full possession of her wits, —they never were more alert,—she could not, to save her life, have described what happened between the time she darted through the door and the moment that found her out in the Semlik road, kicking Selim's ribs with her agitated heels as that noble beast fairly flew from the scene of danger. She would always have the muddled, indistinct recollection of some one grabbing at the horse's bit, of a tumbling figure that grunted, of the ear-splitting clatter of Selim's hoofs on

the timbered floor, of a rush of fresh air, hoarse shouts, stentorian oaths that could have come only from the abysmal chests of the two giants, and last of all, a feminine voice exultingly shrieking "Hi! Hi!"

For perhaps a mile she rode at full speed, curiously obsessed by the fear that she was being pursued by long-striding giants whose hands were clutching at Selim's tail. Then she came to a dead stop, suddenly realizing that she was lost. She was on the main road, of course, and Broadaxe's band had turned off into the Forest. But how was she to find them? After a moment of indecision, she deliberately wheeled about and rode slowly back over the road she had traversed, searching for the carter's path she must have passed by in her flight. It was not until the lights of the inn were in plain view that she made out the opening among the trees. She did not hesitate. The blackness ahead did not daunt her. She knew that Broadaxe and his men were not far ahead. Turning in, she jogged along briskly, giving Selim the rein. The original plan to join the riders as speedily as possible was abandoned. She shrewdly concluded to wait until they were so far away from home that Julius would find it inconvenient to send her back to the Digmans in charge of a couple of his men. So when, after a half-hour's cautious progress, she descried lights bobbing in and out among the trees some distance ahead, a frank sigh of relief escaped her lips. It was comforting to know that she was no longer alone in the dark Forest of Droon. There were rascals and cutthroats in that company ahead, to be sure, but they were friends. More than that, they were men.

For miles and for what seemed to her to be ages, she followed warily—and wearily—the vanishing and re-appearing lights, never allowing herself to draw nearer than a quarter of a mile to the unsuspecting riders. Sometimes they

were far above her on the crests of the ridges, sometimes below her as if they had dropped swiftly into the glens.

She was frightened. Now and then she uttered suppressed little squeaks of alarm as some animal went crashing off through the underbrush,—an inquisitive deer, perhaps, or an investigating bear. At such times it seemed to her that her hair almost lifted the hat from her head, and shivers ran up her spine. Selim also was frightened; he was hard to manage,—especially with one hand. The pistol was gripped tightly in the other. She could hear the distant yelps of wolves; the occasional scream of a mountain lion; the mocking, chiding yawps of night-birds; the ceaseless and sinister swish of unseen things hurtling through the tree-tops almost over her head. And many a time she said fervently to herself that if she were not the daughter of a great and valiant chieftain she would give a lot to be at home and in bed, safe and snug instead of out here in the awful darkness.

But always she stilled her chattering teeth, drew up her sagging shoulders, relaxed the tight clamp of her legs on Selim's sides, and sternly ordered herself not to be a coward. Was she not the daughter of Jonifer the Hawk? Could the daughter of the great Jonifer dare to be a coward? True, she was not big and swart and hairy like this beloved father of hers, but did not his valorous blood flow through her veins? And was not her fair-skinned, blue-eyed mother the bravest lady— Why, even Jonifer himself, and Broadaxe, and all the rest of the dare-devil rogues in the valley were wont, even to this day, to boast of the courage of that gentle captive who not only fell into their clutches on the King's Highway one long-ago day but who in due time also fell in love with their gallant, good-looking leader, courageously married him and lived with him till the day of her death,—was not her mother the brave, contented lady of high degree who brought her into the world and gave to her the blue eyes, soft brown

hair that curled, and the voice that was not like that of any other girl in the mountains? Yes, indeed, there was every reason in the world why it was impossible for her to be a coward,—and she wasn't one,—only she wished to goodness it was not so dark and creepy, and that she could manage her knees a little better so that they would not quake so disgracefully. Why, Selim must be wondering—oh, dear, if Broadaxe and his men would only stop before long to wait for the dawn that—

Suddenly a couple of lanterns flashed in the road not thirty feet ahead and loud voices commanded her to halt.

"On peril of your life!"

She pulled Selim to his haunches. By the uncertain light she made out half-a-dozen men blocking the road. They were on foot. The momentary panic of alarm that assailed her gave way almost instantly to relief. She sagged down in the saddle with a little cry of joy. All of them wore masks and while they pointed pistols at her as all highwaymen should do, she was not afraid,—not half as much afraid of these real devils as she had been of the imaginary witches who had been chasing her for miles through the forest.

"Speak! Who are you?" called out a voice.

"Hi-i!" fairly squealed Gerane. "Don't you know me? What the devil do you mean, stopping the great Jonifer's daughter on the road like this? Hands up, yourselves! Come! Be quick! Stand and deliver, or I will blow the heads off of every last man of you!"

A moment of speechless astonishment and then a guttural chorus of invocations to various saints, male and female, concluding with an honestly bellowed:

"Roast me in hell! It's—it's Gerane!"

"Aye, so it is, good Julius," she cried, her naturally low voice taking on a shrillness and jerkiness that betrayed a very decided state of uneasiness. This was serious. Julius Broad-

axe was not a man to be trifled with or wheedled. It would be just like him to fly into a rage,—a virtuous rage, she was bound to admit,—and force her to remain where she was in charge of several of his men until—

But it would never do to reveal the slightest sign of this inward perturbation. Sitting up very erect in the saddle she exclaimed in her loftiest manner:

"Come, come! What business have you to be dallying along the road at a time like this, Julius Broadaxe? We are wasting time. Don't you know that you should be at an appointed spot at an appointed time? You very well know what will happen to you if you are as much as two minutes late. Where are your horses? Ha! I see! May the good God defend us! I see it all. You have mutinied. You have deserted my father—"

A roar of laughter silenced her.

"It is no laughing matter," she began, and suddenly put her hand to her mouth. It *was* a laughing matter, and no one knew it better than she. The idea of Julius Broadaxe turning traitor!

"I am sorry I said that, Julius," she cried, contritely. "It was mean of me. But, thank our Good Lady, you see fit to laugh instead of curse."

"Aye," broke in Broadaxe, coming quickly to her side, "but you are right. It is not a laughing matter. Most certainly it is not a laughing matter, Gerane. And I would have you know, young lady, that I for one did not laugh. Fetch me a lantern, Boaz, let me make sure that she is real and that I am not a-dreaming or bewitched." He removed his mask, the better to squint and frown in his perplexity. Two men were holding Selim by the bit.

"Shall I pinch you, Julius?" inquired Gerane, hastily. "I would much rather pinch you than to have you pinch me with those great fingers."

"Never mind," growled Broadaxe, passing his hand over his brow. "I am not a-dreaming. Now, by all the saints, where the devil do you come from and why are you following us into the—"

"The evil one himself picked her up and carried her across the mountains, God defend us," broke in one of the men, piously, and would have gone to his knees but for a sharp jab in the side from one of his comrades.

"Be quiet," whispered this individual, who was, after all, very much of the same opinion although not lacking in reserve.

"How did you manage to get past the Digmans?" demanded Broadaxe, his bewildered brain beginning to show symptoms of clearing.

"Oh, that was quite simple," said she, glibly. "I am not sure, but I have an idea they thought I was a black witch astride a black horse that— But we waste time, Julius. Let us proceed at once. I will explain as we ride along. If you—"

"Proceed, eh? Well, now, that is just what we cannot do. Was ever man in a worse fix than I am in?" He pondered long and deeply. "What to do, I know not. If I take you with me, your father will string me up by the thumbs. If I send you back, he will blow my head off for trusting you to the mercy of any of these dogs of hell, every last one of them being in love with you and—aye, roast me, what *am* I to do?" His sigh was a groan that seemed to come from the depths of the earth.

"Bless your heart, Julius," said she, leaning down to stroke his shoulder; "why all this distress? My father is expecting me. I told him I was coming."

"What is this?" gasped the blacksmith, blinking.

"The God's truth," said she. "I told him a dozen times over that I was coming and that nothing should stop me.

Well? Isn't that enough? Here I am, so compose yourself, my friend. At this very moment, I am willing to wager, my father is wondering why I have been so long in catching up to him."

"God defend my soul!"

"More than likely he is terribly worried, fearing that some evil may have befallen me,—such as being lost in the Forest or devoured by bears or set upon by rogues who—"

She was interrupted by Broadaxe's sudden command to advance.

"Keep a tight grip on the bit," he cautioned the head man. "We will decide what to do when we've joined the others. I want time to think. Be silent, all of you. I cannot think if you are all chattering—this means you too, Gerane. Not another word, young lady. Keep your mouths shut, all of you." He groaned again. "Never have I needed more time to think than now, and never have I had so little time to think."

The party hurried forward, the huge Broadaxe stalking at Gerane's knee. The latter, feeling very much like a child caught in an act of mischief and in considerable doubt as to the consequences, was nevertheless triumphant. Much as she wished to talk and to ask questions, she wisely refrained from doing so. She decided that it was best to let poor old Broadaxe think. An occasional expletive surging up from his harassed soul reached her ears although it was emitted in a desperately repressed undertone. A fair insight to the character of his reflections was afforded her in these quite frequent explosions. There could be no doubt whatever that Julius was thinking, —hard and violently.

Suddenly she began to feel very tired and unheroic. She wished she could see her father at once and have it all over with.

Ten or fifteen minutes later they came up with the rest of

the party, waiting—at the roadside. The news had been carried forward by two or three excited—(exasperated would be the better word)—members of the squad that had held her up, so that when she arrived with Julius there was no outburst of surprise. On the contrary, the gloomiest taciturnity prevailed. Broadaxe, evidently impressed by the failure of his own attempts to think, called the group into conference. First, he sent Gerane a short distance down the road in charge of the two men who were again sternly exhorted to keep a tight grip on Selim's bridle.

The conference was brief. In a very few minutes, Julius and the others rode up.

"Well," began Gerane, with well-assumed impatience, "haven't we wasted enough time? I should think—"

"Hark ye, Gerane," said Broadaxe, as if he had not heard her; "we have decided to take you with us and turn you over to your father. There is no other way out of it. But it is the opinion of all of us, without a single voice to the contrary, that you ought to be whipped within an inch of your life for the damnable, foolish thing you've done. And we have taken a vote on the subject, young woman. It is our judgment that Jonifer Davos be hereby requested and also commanded to publicly and in the presence of his loyal supporters tie you to a tree and give you thirty lashes, which we are all agreed that you deserve, although some were honest enough to vote for fifty lashes."

Her sharp ears caught the sound of suppressed chuckles among the horsemen. She giggled.

"Very well, good Julius," she said, straightening her face. "But before we go a step farther, I wish to say that I was so glad to see you all that I could have kissed every last man of you. However, now that you have voted to have me whipped, I shall not kiss a single one of you. Come on! We're late. What is the hour?"

The moon, long since risen, threw a mellow light into the open glen. Gerane sat straight and eager in the center of the fantastic group. All about her were masked and cloaked men on stamping, cavorting horses,—a fierce and sinister company that would have struck terror to the doughtiest knight of old,—and at her side towered Julius Broadaxe, the most terrible of them all. She smiled up at him as she asked the question.

"Roast me in—" began the miserable captain of the troop. He checked the words, called for a lantern, and drew from a fold in his sash a massive gold watch (once the property of a hapless merchant of Odessa whose widow would have thanked Julius if she had known how to communicate with him), and announced that it was well past midnight.

"Forward!" he ordered in the next breath.

They set off at a smart pace down the mountain road, Broadaxe riding at Gerane's side. After a long silence, he condescended to inform her that the various detachments were expected to consolidate at a given point by two o'clock and there go into camp to await the dawn.

"The dawn of my birthday," said she, musingly.

"And to think that we intended that it should be the most glorious birthday that any girl ever had," lamented he. "You've spoiled it all by—"

"Don't be a goose, Julius," she interrupted. "I never was so happy in my life. I never was so thrilled. And will my—my father be there? I mean at the meeting-place?"

"He will," said Broadaxe tersely.

"Heigh-ho," sighed Gerane, involuntarily.

It was past two o'clock when they rode into camp, where fires were burning and men were eating of savory victuals cooked over them. Broadaxe's party was the last to reach the appointed spot. Two score horses and as many men,—it would not be amiss to say forty thieves,—had come to rest

in a peaceful little glen not more than two miles from the King's Highway. Here they were to await the return of messengers sent out to obtain reports from certain supposedly impeccable woodsmen and hunters whose present business it was to spy upon the movements of the prospective prey. If these reports were satisfactory,—especially in regard to the size and character of the merchant's escort,—the whole band would be on the way again before daybreak. It was their custom to ford the swift but shallow mountain-stream, leave the horses in charge of a few young and untried novices at the game, and then proceed on foot up the slope to post themselves in ambush along the Highway. So cunningly, so systematically were all these preparations invariably carried out that even the most cautious victims were bound to find themselves in the trap before they were fairly aware of its presence. And woe betide the valiant, victorious guardsmen who, in case of rout, undertook to pursue the marauders as they scuttled down the slope!

Jonifer Davos had been anxiously pacing up and down in front of one of the fires for some time before a shout announced the belated approach of Julius Broadaxe. A few moments later the belated horsemen swung off the road into the glen. The chieftain, his face as black as a thundercloud, strode forward. Never before had one of his lieutenants been so late as this,—a full half-hour by the watch. And Broadaxe, of all persons!

"How now, Julius?" roared he. "What excuse have you? Speak up, man. What excuse?"

"Well, sir, I shall let my excuse speak for herself. But beforehand, Jonifer, I am in duty bound to say that we took a vote and decided that not less than thirty lashes should—"

But Jonifer heard him not. With a hoarse cry, he sprang forward and snatched Gerane bodily out of the saddle. Holding her close to his breast he strode toward the nearest fire,

the center of all startled, incredulous eyes. She had her arms around his neck, her nose almost imbedded in the hard flesh under his ear, while her heels dangled ingloriously some distance from the ground. That she was by no means sure of him may be gathered from the following remark, gasped breathlessly into the cords of his neck and therefore unheard by him:

"Not thirty lashes, father,—if you love me, oh, please, not thirty lashes."

And he was murmuring in the fullness of his heart:

"Oh, my blessed lamb! I've been worried almost to death. I knew you would follow us somehow. All night long I have been— Hi! Julius! Come tell me the story, man!"

Depositing his daughter upon the ground, he gave her a vigorous but somehow loving shake, his hands patting her slim shoulders during the process.

"Wine, Peter!" he shouted. "Meat, Joseph! Do not stand there with your mouths open. Where are your manners? Can you not see that you are in the presence of the Queen? Wine, I say! She is shivering like a whipped dog. What was that you said about thirty lashes, Julius?" Then to Gerane: "Oh, you damned little darling!"

CHAPTER III

THE RICH MERCHANT PASSETH BY

A CERTAIN rich merchant in Edelweiss was named Leopold Mathias. His father before him also was called Leopold Mathias, and while he was rich he was not so rich, nor so greedy, nor so contemptuous as the son who stepped in his shoes, so to speak, when death caused him to vacate them at the hale old age of eighty. And, speaking of that, there were acquaintances who declared that the younger Mathias had got at least one of his feet into his father's shoes and was persistently struggling to get the other one in some two or three years before the old man relinquished the ghost and the business at the same time (a filial endeavor which, according to report, had a great deal to do with shortening the life of the elder Mathias) and went off to join his forebears in that bourn whose streets are said to be paved with the very article he had been grubbing for all his mortal days.

Now, this younger Mathias was known far and wide throughout all the countries of Europe as a merchant whose wares were tempting, costly and of the most enticing variety. He dealt only in what, for want of a better term, may be described as priceless things, and his trade, far from being confined to the inconspicuous though ancient city of Edelweiss, extended, some said, to the most inaccessible spots on the globe, —for example, to such places as the Royal Palace in St. Petersburg, the Emperor's Castle in Vienna, the homes of the kings of Italy and Spain and Belgium, to say nothing of the richly embellished though jealously guarded courtesans who flourished within reach of half the thrones of Europe.

Certain notable actresses of the day, reigning in domains comfortably accessible to lavish spendthrifts, were known to be figuratively—and more or less impartially—"smothered" with pearls and diamonds and rubies that had passed through the hands of Leopold Mathias, the Second.

His place of business at Edelweiss was in Regengetz Circus, almost opposite the entrance to Castle Avenue. It consisted of a small room on the second floor fronting the street, with two "private offices" or exhibition rooms at the back. The first floor was occupied by the banking and money-lending concern of E. Blotz & Sons, who, as a matter of course, employed a night-watchman, thus rendering Mr. Mathias a protective service apparently without intending to do so. As a matter of fact, the shrewd purveyor of gems was a member of the banking firm although his connection with the concern was unknown to all save a few noblemen who were as secretly and as surreptitiously interested as he in the conduct of the reputable if somewhat unpopular establishment of E. Blotz & Sons. A duke, a marquis and a count were among the sub-rosa backers of this usurious concern. To be sure, they did not bank with E. Blotz & Sons, nor did Leopold Mathias.

But this is neither here nor there; it has nothing to do with the story of Gerane Davos, whose life up to her nineteenth birthday was more or less uneventful but whose history from that day on is,—or so it seems to one person, at least,—well worth recording. And, for fear that the reader may be misled into believing that Leopold Mathias is to become a permanent character in the narrative, it is only proper to state here and now that his only excuse for coming into it at all lies in the fact that it was he who fared forth on the morning of September the tenth, bent on transporting over the King's Highway certain precious stones and ornaments ultimately intended for dispersal among ladies of high estate in the city of St. Petersburg. And this journey of his would have been no

different from dozens of similar trips over a period of ten or fifteen years had it not happened to be co-incidental with the nineteenth birthday of the beloved daughter of Jonifer Davos, King of all Will-o'-the-Wisps and hereditary chieftain of the sprightly thieves of Droon Forest.

Nevertheless, Leopold Mathias was a person of importance. He was plump, sixty and opulent. Successful avarice had made him arrogant and, to a certain extent, contemptuously optimistic. Was he not in the habit of going about the whole of Europe with fortunes valued at thousands of sovereigns or rubles or gavvos in the chests and bags he carried? Were not his safes in the room above the bank stuffed with precious baubles that flowed in honest streams from the treasure springs of far-off India and the mystic Orient, from Athens and Constantinople and Cairo, from the sorcery-steeped coasts of Africa and the fabulous caves of Aladdin? Was he not the son of Leopold Mathias? Was he not the husband of the most virtuous and admirable of all women and the father of nine excellent sons and daughters, all of whom were married to his if not to the queen's taste? Why, then, should not Leopold Mathias be regarded as a person of importance?

His position in Edelweiss was unique. He was the only merchant in the capital who could truthfully say that royalty itself in the person of the recently deceased and greatly lamented Prince had since earliest boyhood called him by his first name, while every nobleman in the land familiarly addressed him as "Leppy." And duchesses, countesses and baronesses bowed to him and called him Mr. Mathias; nor were they above solicitously consulting him when in doubt as to the state of his health and his family's health. Nearly all of them owed him money.

Among those who went out of their way to be on friendly terms with the rich merchant were Count Emlen Jabassy and his handsome, black-eyed wife, the Countess Katrane. The

latter, a direct descendant of the "pretender" duke who, several generations back, had tried by force of arms to oust his half-brother from the throne of Graustark, was one of the most popular women at court, notwithstanding her relationship to that distant, thwarted rebel who, with many of his loyal and devoted supporters, was publicly beheaded in the parade ground fronting the fortress. Her own great-grandfather, then a schoolboy, had been whisked off to Paris by his mother in time to escape the fate that befell the would-be usurper's family and such of his fellow-conspirators as were not able to escape the just wrath of the Crown. He was the only son of the covetous duke.

The estates of this rebel half-brother were confiscated by the Crown and the title abolished. All that part of Graustark lying west of Ganlook, including the Forest of Droon, had belonged to the duke by virtue of a royal decree issued a few months prior to the death of the old ruler who was father of the two half-brothers. To the eldest son went, as a matter of course, the Crown and all of its rights, privileges and powers.

The younger son hated and envied his half-brother, successor to the throne. He had many friends and followers. The revolution which ended so disastrously to the "pretender" came to pass in the fifth year of the reign of Prince Caspar, along toward the close of the eighteenth century.

Less than a score of the pretender's supporters, chased like rats, succeeded in finding refuge from the fury of the enemy through the friendly offices of noncombatants who farmed and hunted and otherwise eked out an existence along the slopes or in the forests which made up the major part of the duke's domain. These fugitives were smuggled into the lofty valley that was, in later days, the abiding place of Jonifer Davos and his "merry men," many of whom were the grandchildren of the original settlers. So relentless were the efforts of Prince

Caspar to run down and capture all those concerned in the uprising that these unfortunate,—or perhaps they were lucky,—fugitives, not only feared to stick their noses out of this sequestered, unknown glen, but finally settled down and cast their lot with the few ignorant hillmen who were there before them.

It was not until 1840 or thereabouts that a grandson of the duke and blood relation to the reigning Prince of Graustark came to dwell in the mountain stronghold, himself a fugitive from justice and the wrath of a Russian Czar against whom he had plotted with such ill-success that there was nothing left for him to do but vanish from the face of the earth and, paradoxically, to bury himself therein.

This grandson, embittered against the world and against Graustark in particular, was a ruthless, adventurous marplot. It was he who first inspired the more or less peaceful and contented dwellers in the glen to deeds of violence against the Crown, leading them in depredations that soon were to make the King's Highway a place of terror to all honest travelers. And it was this Jonifer Davos, whose real name was the same as that borne by the royal family of Graustark, although it wisely had been abandoned by his exiled father at the beginning of his flight to Paris,—it was this Jonifer who was the sire of Jonifer the Hawk, his successor as chieftain of the robbers and the father of the lovely, if sometimes shrewish, Gerane.

When the first Jonifer came to the glen to hide himself among the people whose forebears had served under the ill-starred banner of his grandfather he brought with him his two-year-old son, deserting his wife and daughter, a child of seven, both of whom he heartlessly abandoned in Bucharest, where for a short season he had found sanctuary after the flight from St. Petersburg.

He despised and distrusted his wife, a Russian lady whose

family, while not noble, was fanatically loyal to the Czar. He was convinced that sooner or later she would betray him into the hands of the authorities,—that she would have done so long ago, he grimly believed, had not fear of him proven too grave an obstacle in the path of her inclinations. While he cared for his little daughter in a way, he had no compunction at all in leaving her to the mother, deliberately blotting her out of his life. She was only a girl. Girls did not count for much in the future calculations of Jonifer Davos the First. It was different, however, with his son. This outcast baby boy was a definite link in the royal chain. If fortune had cut the cards differently, he would now be a direct heir to the throne of Graustark; and always there was the secret, unquenchable hope that—but even Jonifer, the duke's grandson, was too good a gambler to bank on the improbable. The time for gambling passed long before either of them was born.

His wife never saw or heard from him again. In course of time she fell in with several rich, pleasure-seeking residents of Edelweiss, choice spirits who were by virtue of certain sporting tendencies in high favor with the *haute monde* of Graustark's capital. She was clever, resourceful, attractive, a thorough woman of the world. A gentleman of Edelweiss became enamored of her. She went to that city to live,—at any rate, in her rôle of a bird of passage, she elected to pause there in her restless flight from one roost to another, with no idea of settling beyond the duration of the gentleman's profitable infatuation. To shorten the story, she stayed in Edelweiss until the day of her death some ten years later and, wonder of all wonders, through the intercession of powerful friends, obtained from the Crown what may be described, for want of a better term, forgiveness for the sins of her husband's ancestor. By royal dispensation she was conceded a small estate and an income which in reality was no less

than an imperial pension. The royal family, however, rigidly if not righteously ignored her. She was never received at Court nor was she recognized beyond the bestowal upon her of the title of countess, and this no doubt was done for political reasons.

Her daughter grew up to be a handsome, dashing maiden and was earnestly wooed by many young sprigs of the nobility whose mothers did a lot of fidgeting until relief came to them in the shape of Katrane's marriage to Count Jabassy, a young man who had sowed his wild oats with surprising ingenuousness and on that account was received in the best society because practically every family of consequence in town had had a share, one way or another, in the harvest. A year or so after Katrane's marriage, her mother died.

Among those who attended the funeral services in the cathedral was a lank, overgrown boy of seventeen whom no one had ever seen before. After the ceremony this good-looking, dark-haired stranger presented himself at the home of the bereaved young Countess in Prince Rudovic Street and delivered to her, with the compliments of his father, a small casket containing jewels and heirlooms that had been the property of her mother up to the day she was deserted by Jonifer Davos. Before departing he coolly informed her that he was her brother and the son of the woman who had just been consigned to the tomb.

She was dumbfounded, incredulous. They were alone in her boudoir.

"You? *You* my little brother? The—the baby I used to play with so long ago? But my father, where is he, if you speak the truth?"

"Are you not satisfied, Katrane? That is your name, I know. My father has so often spoken it in my presence. Are you not satisfied with these things that were my mother's and which now are yours? Or must you ask questions?"

"Of course I must ask questions. Listen to me, boy. But first, what is your name?"

"The same as my father's. If you remember his name, then you know mine without the telling."

"My father was called Jonifer. It was not his real name."

"Nor is Davos his real name. Now you know the name I go by."

"But where is he? Why does he send you—"

"My mission was to deliver into the hands of my sister, whom I do not remember having seen until this day, the things that were our mother's. I was to tell you who I am and then go my way. My father wants you to know that they come to you from him and that his messenger is your brother. That is all I can say. You are nothing to me, countesses are nothing to me. No more are queens and princesses. Good-by."

"But, wait, Jonifer," she cried, eagerly. All traces of grief had vanished. Her dead mother was, for the moment, forgotten. "You shall not go until you have told me about my father. I adored him. I was very small when he went away. My mother always said she hoped he was dead. But not I, Jonifer. I adored him. He was so big and strong and so full of fun. For many years I grieved for him. I used to pray that he would come back and carry me off with him. He must still be alive or he could not have sent you to me with these jewels. Where is he, little Jonifer? How strange it all is. When I knew you, you could not talk. Now you are almost a man and—"

"He doesn't care to be bothered with girls," broke in young Jonifer, loftily. "If he had wanted you instead of me he would have taken you when he left. That's quite plain to be seen, is it not? Any fool can see that he did not want to be saddled with a girl. So that is all. Good-by."

"Tell me where he is and how I can find him," she insisted, grasping his arm.

For a long time he regarded her searchingly, his eyes narrowed.

"Listen to me," he said at last, melting a little in response to the appeal in her eyes. "I will do this much for you. I will tell my father all that you have said to me about the way you cared for him and how you felt when he left you behind because he preferred me and did not want to be troubled with you. I shall leave it to him. If he chooses to see you some time, he will say so. Then I will come to you with the message, if he so desires. But it will do you no good to try to seek for him. It would be very dangerous. Be content. You have the jewels, have you not? Isn't that enough for the present?"

"I am overwhelmed. They are magnificent. I always suspected that my mother exaggerated when she tried to describe them to me. But now I know." She gently fingered a long, gorgeous string of pearls, as a miser would caress his gold. "They are magnificent."

"Pooh!" said young Jonifer, scornfully. "They are nothing," he concluded, and went his way.

Several months passed and then one day young Jonifer, in the guise of a gypsy peddler, appeared at the house of the Countess.

"Tell your mistress," said he to the disdainful servant who would have shut the door in his face, "that I would give her a message from one who knew her mother long ago."

"Begone!" commanded the servant.

"Aye, that I will, my good man, but not until I have spoken with your mistress," said the dark-eyed youth, scowling a little. "Make haste, fellow,—or have the curse of the Black Queen put upon you."

Only too well did the servant believe in the potency of a gypsy curse and especially terrible was the curse of Black

Queen Yanzi who was beheaded centuries ago for the spell of famine and drouth she had cast upon the land. He shrank from having the gypsy curse put upon him.

Presently he returned and obsequiously requested the young peddler to follow him up to the Countess's boudoir. The result of this long-expected and desired visit was the meeting of father and daughter outside the city walls. Strange to say, young Jonifer took a great fancy to his sister and, even stranger, she to him. But it was not until some years after the death of the elder Davos and his son's ascendancy to the chieftainship of the band that preyed upon the rich and lordly citizens of Graustark that the Countess Katrane, urged by avarice and an almost prenatal antagonism to the house of Ganlook (the house that had produced rulers of Graustark since the reign of Prince Ganlook in the Thirteenth Century), cast her lot secretly with the fortunes of her brother and became the head of a small group of spies and intermediaries in Edelweiss through whom the movements of certain rich travelers were made known to the thieves in the Forest of Droon.

And now, many years after this alliance, she and her husband, a spineless individual with scant courage and a diminishing honor, lived in ease and comfort on their share of the spoils taken on the King's Highway, although they constantly were under an invisible cloud that might at any time take shape and destroy them. They were the leaders of a small, select coterie of rascals,—the ugly term being applicable to both sexes in this instance,—and so skillful were their operations that even Baron Dangloss, Minister of Police, and one of the most astute thief-catchers in the Near East, never for an instant suspected one of them. He was more irritated than astounded by the seemingly uncanny accuracy of the brigands in timing their swift raids, for he knew as well as he knew

his own name that there was no guesswork about it. He would have given his head,—at least, so he swore,—for the slightest clew to the identity of the go-betweens.

Several days before Leopold Mathias started out on his journey over the King's Highway to Balak, in Axphain, where he intended as usual to board the railway train that made connection some distance farther on with the express for St. Petersburg, he happened upon Count Jabassy and his wife in the rotunda of the Hotel Regengetz. They were waiting for friends to join them at luncheon. Leopold always experienced an inward though outwardly unnoticeable inflation when any member of the nobility voluntarily accosted him in friendly fashion. He was a very shrewd, but also an excessively vain man. So when the Count greeted him familiarly and the Countess smiled upon him as only she could smile, he was transported to the seventh heaven designed for and always temporarily occupied by such pompous nobodies as he. They, on the other hand, punctiliously were polite to Leopold because they owed him money. They invited him to sit down and smoke a cigarette with them.

During the course of conversation, he spoke of the coming trip to St. Petersburg. Before he was through with it, he had confided to the Count and Countess that he was conveying an extraordinarily impressive collection of jewels and priceless fabrics to the Russian capital, adding in his most *dégagé* manner that he would have undertaken the journey with no other guard than that provided by his own postilions and men servants had not Baron Dangloss, after learning the extent and value of his treasure, insisted upon supplying him with protection in the shape of a small detachment of troopers from the Tower.

"'But, my dear Baron,' said I, 'that is quite unnecessary. There has not been a single depredation on the King's Highway in nearly a year. Less than two months ago I passed over

it with goods valued at a hundred thousand rubles and was not molested,—except by mosquitoes and those confounded little black flies that abound in July. Thank you, just the same, my dear Baron, but I am not in the least alarmed or uneasy.' (As a matter of fact, Mr. Mathias had gone to the tower and begged for an armed escort.) The Baron, he said to me, dubiously: 'My dear Leopold, it is too great a risk you would take. True, the robbers have not been active in many months but—' and so on and so forth, my dear Countess. You know how tiresome these police officials can be sometimes. Well, the long and short of it is, I am to have a bodyguard of a dozen men, armed to the teeth, as they say. It is quite amusing, is it not?"

"Very," said Count Jabassy.

"Quite," agreed the Countess.

And so, without further waste of words, the nutshell may be considered full. Jonifer Davos knew precisely the hour of the rich merchant's departure from the city gates, the approximate value and character of his wares, the size of his escort, and, by process of reasoning, the time when he would reach a given point in the Forest of Droon.

Leopold Mathias, comfortably seated in a roomy coach, surrounded by bags and parcels and innocent-looking bales, set forth shortly after dawn on the morning of the tenth. One of his clerks sat facing him, while his personal servant was up beside the driver. Two postilions rode behind and another went in front. This was his usual retinue. But today there were six troopers up ahead, with six more following behind. They were in charge of Captain Starcourt, a young officer recently attached to the smartest regiment in the army, the Duke's Dragoons, so named because their predecessors were commanded by Her Serene Highness's brother at the decisive battle of North-Gate in the year 1642, during the war with Dawsbergen.

By nightfall the party was well advanced into the Pass of the Two Kings, having covered over forty odd miles of the journey to Balak. They went into camp alongside the Highway in a shallow glen known to travelers from time immemorial as Night's Rest. Here at the base of a shelving cliff were stone ovens, a gushing spring of ice-cold water, and a few crude sheds thrown up to provide shelter for wayfarers in case of foul weather. This glen was situated on the very threshold, so to speak, of the forbidding, far-stretching Inn of the Hawk and Raven.

Mr. Mathias was glad to get out and ease his tortured bones. Also he was glad to have some one to talk to besides the sleepy clerk who had sat opposite him all the way from Edelweiss. And he was more than glad to see all these sturdy, dependable, rather swaggering men-at-arms about him. They were most comforting. He felt quite jovial.

Presently fires were going in the ovens and the heavenly odor of stews and broiling meats—ah, beamed Leopold Mathias, what a joy it was to be really hungry like this! And sleepy, too. He would sleep like a log, with all these brave fellows about. And this Captain Starcourt,—what a fine-looking chap he was. Never had he seen a more soldierly-looking, gallant young fellow in all his life. He was very proud of young Captain Starcourt. Not even in Vienna, famed for the splendor of its military Adonises, were there such elegant specimens. It was a pleasure, a distinction, to be served by such a specimen.

Moreover, for the first time, Mr. Mathias found himself taking notice of the uniform of the Graustark army. Heretofore, he had regarded it as rather commonplace, lacking in all the qualities that made for a good, upstanding soldier. He eyed Captain Starcourt with increasing favor. Yes, said he to himself more than once during the day, the uniform of the Duke's Dragoons was well worth looking at. It had style, it

had what one might call flourish, and it was undeniably valiant. He approved of the dark green coat,—especially did he like the way it fitted about the back and shoulders,—and the rakish red cap with the black band and visor. . . . —Well, commented Mr. Mathias critically, one certainly ought to feel safe in such company as this.

Nevertheless, he was a little awed and to a certain extent annoyed by the reserve, the seemingly unnecessary taciturnity of the captain of his guard. He took some comfort, however, in the reflection that no doubt this strapping young fellow was a trifle conscious of his own insignificance in the presence of so important a person as he. If that were the case, he would make a point of putting the shy dragoon at his ease. He would show him that the great Leopold Mathias could be as genial and as affable as anybody else.

So, while the men were quartering their horses and preparing supper, he strode over to join the captain who was seated on a log, moodily puffing at his pipe. In order to carry out his design to put the young man perfectly at ease, he stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his floreated waistcoat, exposing the full expanse of an amiable and ingratiating paunch, set his Homburg hat far enough back on his head to reveal the outskirts of a very jolly sort of bald-spot, and assumed his most benign smile.

"Well, Captain," said he, sitting down on the log beside the officer, "it has been a comfortable journey so far, has it not?"

"It has been a long one," said the young man, briefly.

"I daresay it is rather fatiguing to one who is obliged to sit in the saddle for so long a stretch."

"Quite," said Captain Starcourt.

This was not getting on very well, thought Mr. Mathias. He drew forth a case of cigars.

"Have one," said he.

"No, thank you. I am enjoying my pipe, if you see what I mean, sir."

"Ahem! Spoken like an Englishman. Am I mistaken in assuming that you—er—have spent some time in England?"

"I was born in England," said the other.

"Indeed? You surprise me. Or rather, you do not surprise me. I know England very well. Many delightful acquaintances in London. Some of my best customers live—ahem! As I was saying, pipe smoking is distinctly an English habit. I sometimes envy the English the enjoyment they obtain from—ahem! You will pardon me if I express surprise that you, an Englishman, should be in the Graustark army. Quite unusual,—ah,—if you see what I mean,—Captain—ah—"

"Starcourt is my name."

"Starcourt? Ah, that is English. And now that I have had a good look at you, I can quite believe you when you say you are English,—typically English."

"My mother was born and bred in Graustark, Mr. Mathias," volunteered the other. "She married an Englishman. That's how it happens, you see."

"You mean she was a—ah—native-born Graustarkian?"

"She is, Mr. Mathias, not was."

"Ah, I see, I see. Well, well! How very interesting. So that is how you come to be in our army. I see."

He waited for the implied invitation to take effect. Captain Starcourt took two or three slow, deliberate pulls at his pipe. Then he turned to Mr. Mathias with a smile on his clean-cut lips. ("A most uncommonly good-looking chap," thought Mr. Mathias, rewarded.)

"My mother's father was an officer in the Duke's Dragoons, Mr. Mathias, and his father before him. It is not my fault that I happened to have had an English father, you know."

"Not at all, not at all," agreed Mr. Mathias, hastily. "I see, yes, indeed, I see quite clearly. An international marriage, so to speak."

"So to speak," said Captain Starcourt, obligingly.

"But, in spite of that, Captain, you must be an English subject. The son of an Englishman is always an—"

"My father died when I was a very small boy. After his death my mother returned to Edelweiss. She has lived here ever since. I went to school in England, however, and to Oxford. That may account for the pipe." He knocked out the ashes and arose. "I think supper is almost ready, Mr. Mathias. If you care to freshen yourself up a bit after the journey, you will find water at the spring over there." He hesitated, then gestured spaciously and hospitably. "Will you join me, sir?"

"With pleasure," said Mr. Mathias, and together they went to the pool and washed their hands and faces, the merchant ejaculating "Ah" and "Um" and "Ar-r-r-r" a great many times during the process, each utterance being a separate kind of grunt resulting from the strain imposed upon his plump body by the unaccustomed attitude he was forced to take in stooping so low.

He sought but failed to gain another opportunity to chat with the young captain. Starcourt, after posting a guard, wrapped himself in a blanket and promptly went to sleep, briskly explaining that they would have to be on the move soon after daybreak. Mr. Mathias, cheered considerably by the fires in the stone ovens and the presence of card-playing soldiers near by, retired to the coach where a suitable bed had been produced by an arrangement of bales and bags. He was a long time in going to sleep, however. Deprived of the anticipated pleasure of conversing at length with the captain of the troop, he did the next best thing and talked to himself for an hour or two before dropping off to sleep. And nothing could have caused him greater astonishment than to have this one-sided conversation interrupted by the clatter of pans, the stamping of horses and the jangle of harness, for, on opening his eyes, he gazed out upon the gray, dull light of dawn.

He fumbled for his watch. It was nearly six o'clock. Good heavens, had he been talking to himself all that time without—

He blinked and then sat up frowning. "Bless my soul," he muttered, "I must be dreaming all this." For every sound outside the coach suddenly had ceased. An absolute silence supported his suspicion that he had dreamed "all this" and that the camp was still deep in slumber. He was on the point of blissfully sinking back upon his improvised couch when there came to him the sound of a clear, stentorian voice uttering these startling, hideous words:

"Stand as you are! The first man to move hand or foot will have bullets for breakfast."

Mr. Leopold Mathias felt himself suddenly turn to ice. My God! The robbers! The *robbers!* Where,—where the devil were those dragoons and that supercilious English—

The voice continued, cold, calm, diabolically distinct.

"You are covered by two score guns. Look about you. Turn your eyes, but do not move your bodies. Behold death on every side. If you would like to live to go back and tell your comrades that you have had the pleasure of meeting Jonifer Davos and his robbers of Droon and found them to be peaceable, friendly gentlemen, make no attempt to draw a weapon."

Mr. Mathias groaned.

"A single move, a single command, and there will be dead men lying where you are now standing. In the wink of an eye—puff! It will be all over. Now, then, Captain, a few words with the occupant of yon coach and you may proceed with your preparations for the morning meal. You will not be disturbed again. Ho! What is this? By all the saints, does Mr. Leopold Mathias still lie abed? Halloa! Mr. Mathias! Arouse yourself. You have ready customers at your door."

It should go without saying that Mr. Mâthias failed to appreciate or relish the robber chieftain's wit. He was by no means asleep. As a matter of fact, after popping up his night-capped head for a quick but lasting peep through the coach window, he now had it completely buried under a pile of garments, from which issued a series of muffled moans.

Now what Mr. Mathias beheld in the pale, dull gray of dawn was this: A dozen men in the colorful garb of royal soldiers stationed here and there in close proximity to the coach, their hands on high, their bodies as stiff as ramrods; his own clerk on his knees, his man-servant standing stockstill half-way across the glen with a pail of water in one hand, the other aloft; the handsome Captain Starcourt, coatless and bareheaded, standing very straight and rigid, not ten feet from the coach, one uplifted hand holding a towel while the other rested in suspended desperation on the hip where his pistol would have been were it not reposing with his coat and cap and saber on a stump some distance away; and on every side, completely dominating the horrid picture, a thousand or more appalling figures in cloaks and masks, pointing guns at *him* (Leopold Mathias) and not at the cowardly wretches who were pledged to suffer a glorious death in his defense. He took it all in at a glance and then ducked his head.

His moans redoubled in volume as the coach-door swung open with a bang.

"Come out!" was the imperative command that reached his ears.

The terrified merchant unconsciously had emulated the ostrich. While his head was snugly buried, the rest of his body was exposed to view. An iron hand gripped one of his ankles so tightly that he squealed; a second later something closed down upon the band of his trousers,—(owing to nature there was no slack to them),—and he felt himself being swiftly, irresistibly yanked through the door, scattering parcels,

bags and raiment as he went. Expecting to land on the ground with a thump, he squeezed his eyes tight and momentarily ceased his moaning. But to his surprise, other hands caught him in midair, it seemed, and he was deposited with unbelievable accuracy upon his two feet.

"Oh, my God!" he quaked, without opening his eyes. "Do not shoot! I surrender! I have them up!" His hands flew up above his night-capped head. An instant later, he was repeating, "Oh, my God!" over and over again, for ruthless hands were going through his pockets, feeling his waistband and trouser legs, and even running ungently over his shivering shirt. Ordinarily Mr. Mathias was ticklish. But he was not ticklish now. He did not twist and squirm and howl with laughter. He merely kept on reiterating, "Oh, my God!"

Gradually he became aware of the fact that conversation was going on about him. He opened his eyes. Two masked individuals were searching him, but they were not talking. His bleak gaze finally fixed itself upon Captain Starcourt and a very tall person who stood in front of the young man, his arms folded,—but in one of his hands was the most enormous pistol he had ever seen. This person was speaking.

Mr. Mathias was conscious of bags and chests and bundles being tossed to the ground behind him, but he did not turn his head. He was fascinated by the scene before him. The dozen troopers still had their hands above their heads; motionless, fantastically garbed phantoms were still sighting over long rifle-barrels; but, strange to say, their numbers had dwindled from a thousand odd to a paltry score or so. Mr. Mathias suddenly felt wrathful. Only a score or so! A mere handful of—

But the tall fellow, evidently the leader, was saying:

"True enough, my young friend,—true enough. But, even so, who can say the fault is yours? I daresay you would prefer death to—well, I would not call it disgrace, if I were you.

What chance had you? Suddenly, out of the ground, from every tree in the glen, spring men with guns. You are surrounded. You are helpless. Of what avail is valor when it can end only in death? And without gain. No, my gallant Captain, I cannot shoot you. We are not assassins. We are gentlemen. That is to say, in times of peace we are gentlemen, and never have I known a more peaceful occasion than this."

"I am dishonored,—everlastingly dishonored," groaned the white-faced, suddenly haggard young officer. "How can I return to my chief and confess my—confess that this—"

"What is there to confess? Once a great general,—one of the greatest in all history,—led his troops into a carefully laid ambush. Three-fourths of his men were killed. He and a few others escaped. Did he go back to his king and confess that he had done a dishonorable thing? He went back with his head up, his jaw set and his eyes full of purpose. And in due time he led another force into the land of the enemy and brought him to his knees. That, sir, is how a great general swallowed his pill. You ask me to shoot you. You think that would be a brave way out of your trouble. On the contrary, sir, it would be the most cowardly way. You do not look like a coward to me. Would you have these men of yours think of you all the rest of their lives as a coward?"

Starcourt's face brightened. A happy thought had struck him.

"There is a way to prove to my men that I am not a coward," he cried. With the quickness of a cat he whirled and sprang toward his weapons.

The suddenness of the act took Jonifer Davos by surprise. Uttering a shout of warning, he fired. To his astonishment, he missed! The next instant Starcourt swung about, straightening up as he did so, and leveled his pistol full at the breast of the robber chief.

"I'll rid the world of you before I die," he shouted, a note of joy ringing in his voice.

Jonifer the Hawk threw up his hands, dropping the discharged pistol to the ground.

"Stop!" he cried.

To his own surprise, Starcourt hesitated.

"If you fire," went on Jonifer rapidly, "it will mean the death of every man in your command. Think! Don't be a fool!" Turning his head, he called out: "If this man shoots, kill every damned one of them!"

For ten,—fifteen,—twenty seconds, there was not a sound, not a move. Jonifer dropped his arms and folded them across his breast. The men engaged in stripping the coach had ceased their hurried labors to stare; even Leopold Mathias, startled by the pistol-shot, gazed wide-eyed. The Captain of the Dragoons slowly lowered his weapon. His chin sank dejectedly.

"I give in," said he, slowly, harshly. "Do what you please with me, but—spare these men of mine."

Jonifer was silent for a moment. Then he said: "You must have been born under a lucky star. I never missed the mark at such close range before. It is God's will that you should live, I suppose."

"To return one day, as the general did, to bring my conqueror to his knees," said Starcourt, lifting his head. A satiric smile played about his drawn lips.

"Even so," responded the robber chieftain gruffly. "Keep your pistol, Captain. You may have been coward enough for a moment or two to want me to shoot you, but you are not cowardly enough to shoot yourself."

He turned on his heel and strode toward the now thoroughly exasperated and somewhat incoherent merchant, who began to curse the Captain of the Duke's Dragoons in no uncertain terms.

"What am I paying you for?" he was sputtering. "Dragoons? Bah! You are a set of filthy cowards, all of you. And as for you, you English dog,—you—you have not the backbone of a worm. Why do you not turn upon these rascals and do your duty? What are you here for? Why—"

"Shut up!" commanded Starcourt, scowling.

"Ha! You—you tell me to shut up, eh? You—you young upstart! You cheap soldier! If I were not about to lose—to lose a fortune—I should laugh,—yes, I should roar with laughter. See! Look! Oh, my God! All of my diamonds and pearls and—"

"Shut up!" roared Jonifer Davos, standing over him, his hand on the grip of his short sword. "Have done! Or would you have your gullet slit—"

"No! No!" squeaked Leopold Mathias, covering his throat with his hands.

"Then do as your Captain orders,—shut up! Come, men! The morn advances. We have no time to waste. The sun will soon be high. Search every crack and cushion in that coach. Leave nothing behind. On with it!" Whirling, he called out sharply to the men who still had their guns leveled at the helpless troopers. "Disarm them at once. Bring forth the thongs. Make haste, all of you."

His gaze went suddenly towards the black, wooded hem of the glen. For a long time he searched the dusky shadows with swift-moving eyes. Then his lips spread in a smile, his white teeth gleaming. He was vastly pleased and relieved.

His daughter Gerane, safe in the gallery of trees, had been spectator to the most bloodless, unsanguinary entertainment ever staged by the robbers of Droon Forest,—and over there in a heap on the ground were her birthday presents, the richest haul the net had yielded in a score of years.

Jonifer the Hawk was happy.

CHAPTER IV

A PRIVATE VIEW—AND WHAT CAME OF IT

GERANE, obeying whispered instructions, had kept herself fairly well-screened behind a tree some forty paces from the scene of action. Quivering with excitement, trepidation and no small amount of exaltation, she had witnessed the whole of the thrilling little drama as it was enacted before her, the sole spectator, save perhaps a few frightened birds.

Just as the first gray of dawn began to steal out of the blackness of night she, with dozens of stealthy, panther-like shadows, had crept up from the ravine skirting the highway. Her father, in a stern whisper, commanded her to remain where she finally found herself, behind a monster tree trunk. She was left alone there while the cat-like rogues who accompanied her, stole off into the darkness to posts appointed, and there she stood for what seemed to be hours but in reality was a scant ten minutes.

She saw the three troopers who were on guard go about among their companions to arouse them; she watched others, rubbing their eyes, scramble to their feet and hastily begin preparations for the breakfast they were to cook; three or four hurried over to where the horses were tethered. Then came the clatter of pans and the subdued voices of men. Her heart sank. Where were her father's men? Why were they so slow in attacking? What could have happened to delay them? Had something gone wrong? Why were they waiting until all these soldiers were awake and prepared to give battle? It did not occur to her that all of Jonifer's men, com-

ing up by devious paths, were not yet in position and ready to spring out upon the unsuspecting prey.

Then she beheld a tall figure, white-shirted and hatless, in loose, red cavalry breeches and shining black boots, striding across the sward, rolling up his sleeves as he went. Suddenly he stopped dead-still. His hand went to his side, his head was bent forward—and then, a second later a sharp, ringing voice broke upon the air. As if by magic, the little glen was alive with men, black-cloaked men who wore masks. They seemed to have sprung from the ground or out of the trunks of the trees. Her heart leaped. She suppressed a shriek of triumph only by clapping her hand to her mouth. Her eyes were blazing with excitement.

From her remote—but not too remote—point of vantage she witnessed everything that succeeded this amazing tableau. Her eyes, darting here, there and everywhere, saw, through the fast diminishing gloom, the alert figures of her cousins as they ran to the coach; she had a glimpse of the ponderous Broadaxe close behind them; she heard the clear command that fell from the lips of her father—and then she made him out, standing in front of the tall figure in the red trousers, his pistol pointed. She saw the officer raise one hand on high, while the other, apparently useless, continued to fumble at his side as if for support.

From that time on she scarcely took her eyes from the face of the young dragoon. She heard every word that passed between him and her father; she saw him suddenly leap toward the stump and snatch up his pistol; she screamed aloud when her father fired, and, but for a sudden faintness, would have dashed down to throw herself upon the soldier before he could fire in return. Closing her eyes tightly she pressed her hand to her heart. Then she heard her father speaking again.

At this, she opened her eyes wide. Once more she was looking straight at the face of the young officer. A sudden wave

of relief surged over her as he lowered the pistol. He was not going to shoot her father. On the contrary, he lifted his head in proud acknowledgment of defeat.

And she knew that never again would she see his like, never again would she look upon a face so godlike, a figure so heroic. His tousled hair was thick and curly, the color of sun-warmed straw; his forehead was broad, his dark eyebrows almost meeting in a challenging scowl above eyes that seemed black to her,—but were not; a firm jaw, a square, clean-cut chin, beardless lips grimly compressed; a full, strong throat and partially bared chest; broad shoulders and—she stared incredulously—yes, he was as tall if not taller than her father.

He was a revelation to her. All her life she had seen none but dark, swarthy men with black hair and beards. Matilde had told her of fair-skinned, light-haired men, but she always had thought of them as fairy princes or mythological gods that existed only in story and song. Now, for the first time in her life,—and on her nineteenth birthday,—she beheld one of these fabulous creatures.

Suddenly she felt a great, inexplicable pity for him. He was so handsome and so helpless. A hero in chains, beaten but not cowed; a gallant figure that dominated the scene notwithstanding the humiliating part he was forced to play.

She was proud of her father. Her heart warmed to him as never before. He too was a gallant gentleman. She shuddered as she thought of the fate that certainly would have befallen this bold young man if Julius Broadaxe or any other member of the band had been in her father's place. Broadaxe would not have spared him. He would have shot him down as— But would the soldier have spared Julius Broadaxe? She doubted it.

She ventured out a little from her place of concealment, impelled by an almost irresistible impulse to rush down to her father's side,—an impulse conquered only by a curious

reluctance to add to the mortification which would have followed the young man's discovery that one of his conquerors was a slip of a girl, whose knees, unbeknown to him, were trembling.

Mr. Leopold Mathias's plight did not interest her. She did not feel sorry for him. He was behaving very badly, most disgustingly, she decided. Serve him right, too, thought she, in view of the way he presently began to abuse and denounce the unfortunate captain of dragoons.

She rather hoped they would drag him over to the pool and duck him, the fat little wretch!

At last she found herself marveling at the rapidity and thoroughness with which her friends performed. Almost before she knew what had happened their task was completed and men were scuttling off into the wood bearing bags and boxes and bundles. Leopold Mathias was now sitting on the ground, his head in his hands, and he was no longer wailing. A few of the brigands were darting about among the soldiers, relieving them of their weapons, whilst others were sorting and testing leather thongs over by the flaming oven. All of them were working with feverish haste.

Her first experience as a highwayman, though necessarily vicarious, was drawing to an end. It was, in a way, disappointing. It had been so easy, so bloodless, so lacking in all those essential deeds of daring and heroism that she had been led to believe attended every raid in which the robbers of Droon Forest took part. She would never again accept as true a word of those hair-raising yarns that were spun by—and now, to her dismay, they were leading the soldiers to trees and tying them up with the leather thongs!

Her eyes went quickly back to the fair-haired captain. He too was walking to a near-by tree, his head bent, his arms folded. Jonifer Davos was giving directions to two of his men, pointing to the chosen tree.

Gerane caught her breath. She felt the blood rush to her face. Anger, an incomprehensible anger, took possession of her. This *was* an outrage! An instant later, casting all injunctions to the winds, she strode out of the wood and advanced upon her father.

Jonifer stopped short in the middle of a sentence, stunned by sight of her. She did not run. Instead she walked quickly, imperiously. The lower part of her face was concealed by the cloak she held before it.

"No!" she cried, loudly. "You shall not do this! It is outrageous. Begone!" This last was directed to the startled robbers who carried the straps. "Do you hear me?"

"Now, by all the devils in—" began Jonifer the Hawk.

"Have you no honor? Is not this man a brave, courageous foe? Would you tie him up like a—like a pig? For shame! Set him free! Let him go his way. He can do no more harm." Turning to the astounded dragoon, she said: "You are free, sir. Go your way in peace. It is my wish. This is my birthday and I—"

Jonifer, having found his voice, interrupted her with a prodigious oath.

"Get back where you belong!" he thundered. "At once! And, by all the saints, I will give you something for your birthday that you'll remember to your dying day."

Starcourt laughed. Addressing Jonifer, he said sarcastically:

"By gad,—I mistook you to be the leader of this band of rascals." Then, bowing to the stripling: "Pardon me, young sir, for my mistake. Prudent lad that you are, I do not blame you for taking jolly good care to lead your bold boys from behind a tree. Discretion is—"

"Leader?" roared Jonifer, aghast. "This—this baby our leader? Now, listen to this, my lads!" He shouted to the gaping robbers all about. "He takes this pretty little lambkin

to be your chieftain. Ho! Ho! Come! Join me in the laugh!"

And laugh he did,—loudly—but mirthlessly. Jonifer was not amused. Indeed, his boisterous levity was cut rather short. Gerane drew a step or two nearer.

"How dare you?" she stormed. "How dare you laugh? Would you make a fool of me?"

"No, my baby," cried her father, holding his sides; "you have attended to that yourself."

The young captain stared with an interest not far removed from bewilderment at the dark, angry eyes that met those of the highwayman without wavering. Nervy, he thought,—nervy of a lad like that to defy—why, the youngster's voice hadn't even lost its boyish treble. And the crown of his peaked hat came no higher than the big ruffian's chin.

"Are you going to tie this man up or are you going to set him free?" demanded the "lad," fiercely.

"Two questions in one," replied Jonifer, "calling for yes and no as an answer. Now, be off," he added sternly. "Enough of this foolishness. Curse me for a zany, I might have known what would happen if I allowed you to come along. I should have trussed you to a tree and left you to the wolves."

"As you are proposing to leave these helpless men," said she, scathingly. "Why not kill them outright?"

"Peace!" commanded Jonifer. "Besides," he added quickly, on second thought, "the wolves never come down to the highway in the daytime."

"Nor the lions, for that matter," supplemented Julius Broadaxe, who was a much perturbed listener.

"And, what is more, the mail stage will pass by here a little before noon, so their bondage cannot last more than a few hours," explained her father, to which Broadaxe appended:

"To say nothing of such stray travelers and mountaineers as may—"

"Have done!" exclaimed Gerane, a little quaver in her voice. "I see you are determined to have your own way about this. Nothing I can say or do will alter your—"

She was interrupted by Starcourt.

"Thank you, young sir," he said, shrugging his shoulders and smiling wryly. "I fear you are too young to appreciate the frequently unpleasant stratagems of war. If you live long enough you will realize that it does not pay to be careless. I quite understand and agree with this excellent gentleman's plan. So long as he declines to accommodate me by blowing my brains out, I can see no reason to question his otherwise intelligent motives. He would be a fool to turn me loose, as you so kindly suggest, only to have me abuse his generosity by cutting the fetters that bind my men and setting the whole pack upon his heels as soon as his back was turned. And that, you may be sure, is precisely what I should do. Moreover, as he very well knows, we would shoot every damned one of you if we had the chance."

"Now, there is common sense for you," said Jonifer, inspired. "I have the greatest respect for the gentleman's opinions, even if you have not, my lambkin. Proceed with your work," he went on, addressing his henchmen. "Tie him up securely. As for you, my baby, come with me. I would have a word with—"

The voice of Leopold Mathias was heard. He was appealing to Gerane.

"Have pity, young sir. Command your varlets to release me and restore my—er—my worthless belongings. There is nothing of value in—"

Gerane paused for a moment to regard the whimpering merchant as she walked toward the road with her father. Jonifer's arm was about her shoulders.

"You go to the devil," she broke in curtly, disdainfully.

The business of securing Starcourt and his company to convenient trees was well-nigh completed when the young man, who had been watching her as she listened with bent, rebellious head, to the low-pitched voice of the tall robber, saw her straighten her shoulders, lift her chin, and without so much as a glance in his direction stalk off across the highway and disappear into the fringe of young trees. Two of the brigands followed her.

"Your son?" inquired the captain as Jonifer came up.

"No," said the other shortly. Then with a note of pride in his voice: "My daughter."

"Good Lord!" fell from Starcourt's lips.

Five minutes later, there was not a highwayman in sight. They had vanished into the forest, some one way, some another, and with them went not only the treasure of Leopold Mathias, but the sabers and pistols of the vaunted Duke's Dragoons. Jonifer the Hawk magnificently said good-by to the captain of the troop. He paused before Leopold Mathias, bowed deeply, and, with his hand on his heart, mockingly said good-by to him.

With the reader's permission, we will also say good-by to the rich merchant of Edelweiss. Suffice it to say that fully two hours elapsed before he and his martial escort were discovered and released by a couple of woodsmen who happened to be passing that way. He was grateful to these stolid, ignorant fellows and promised them reward, but neither he nor the captain of Dragoons had the faintest suspicion that their deliverers were members of the robber band, sent back by Jonifer the Hawk at the tearful behest of his daughter.

Night had wrapped the forest again in its mantle of black before the first of the brigands crept out of the mysterious, unknown pockets in the vast cloak, and silently, stealthily entered the Digman barn. All day long they had remained

hidden in the fastnesses of the hills. It was part of their program. To have presented themselves at the Digman place in broad daylight was unthinkable. So for hours, in little, scattered groups, they had waited for the friendly night to come, as safe from pursuit or discovery as foxes in their holes,—eating, sleeping, idling, but always as alert and as cunning as Reynard himself.

Jonifer and Gerane, with half-a-dozen men, rode through the cavern gate at nine o'clock. Others had preceded them, more were to follow. The utmost caution was observed. No man approached the barnyard until he was certain that the coast was clear. The Digmans saw to that. The secret door and the passage beyond were treasures to be guarded even more zealously than the lives of the men who used them.

Half-an-hour later the chieftain and his daughter, emerging from the canyon, came in sight of the bonfires blazing triumphantly in the pastures below the Davos house. There were five or six of these lively fires going, symbolic of rejoicing on the part of those to whom menfolk had returned in safety. Before the night was over a full score would be flaming brightly in all parts of the little meadow. And not until the last of the adventurers was present to cast the final faggot upon the heap were these fires allowed to die down; up to that time, every blaze was kept alive by the anxious, superstitious watchers.

With each new arrival, a fresh fire was started; and there was singing and dancing and great rejoicing in the valley. The scene, at its height, was an eerie one, viewed from any considerable distance. Seemingly countless figures moved swiftly here and there among the merry fires, darting in and out of the shadows like weird specters that sometimes were oddly red and gay, sometimes black and almost shapeless, depending on their nearness to the revealing flames. From afar could be heard the wild, spirited songs of the revelers,—

haunting melodies born ages ago in the rollicking hearts of gypsies,—swelling in startling, almost savage glee as sentinels heralded the approach of riders, diminishing in volume after the first transports of relief gave way to a sort of hush as the lucky ones, having greeted their men, turned their eyes southward to watch once more for lanterns gayly swinging and swirling as another group swept out of the cleft in the hills.

Gerane and her father galloped recklessly up to the very edge of the fire-lit circle, pulling their horses up with a jerk as they seemed almost on the point of dashing into the flames. Jonifer rose in his stirrups, uttered a shout of greeting and threw himself lightly from the saddle. Gerane's exultant "Hi! Hi!" rang out as she snatched off her hat and waved it above her head.

Whereupon there was a great clamor. The women of the valley lifted their voices in a shrill chorus of triumph as they rushed up to surround Selim and his rider. They had learned of Gerane's exploits from early arrivals, but now here she was safe among them in the flesh. Such gleeful terms of approval and endearment as "You blessed little devil," "You darling angel," "You lovely rascal," "You brave little scamp," filled her ears as she swung down from the saddle and rushed to the arms of Matilde.

"Oh, are you safe?" cried the latter, who, by the way, had not closed her eyes in sleep since the girl's departure. She was tenderly running her hands over Gerane's body as if in search of broken bones, bumps or even bloody gashes.

"Didn't I promise you I would come home to change my clothes?" cried Gerane, squeezing Matilde delightedly. "Well, here I am, dearest,—so dry your eyes and, for the love of heaven, get me something to eat. I am starving."

"You must tell me everything. What a terrible night you must have—"

"Oh, Matilde, I wish you could have seen the young of-

ficer who had charge of the soldiers. He was the most beautiful—"

"Come, come!" interrupted Jonifer, breaking away from an eager, jabbering group. "Get into the house and change your clothes, girl. Make haste. Control your appetite, Gerane, there will be a great feast before long if I can trust my eyes and nose. We have no time to lose, midnight will soon be here and your birthday past and gone. Have you got out the satin and silver dress, Matilde? And the golden slippers? Are they—"

"Yes, Jonifer,—everything is ready for her, even to the lace handkerchief and the fan with the ostrich plumes."

"And the girdle of turquoises that belonged to—" began the excited Eljie.

"With my own hands I cleaned the diamond armlets till they sparkled like ten thousand stars," broke in Rosa.

"The rose made of rubies,—how about that?" demanded Jonifer. "I want that for her hair. Most particularly I want the rose of rubies—"

"Possess your soul in peace, Jonifer," said Matilde, patiently,—even condescendingly. "You shall see the rose of rubies in good time and your eyes will be dazzled as never before."

"I well remember the day and the lady," mused Julius Broadaxe, leaning on his gun and twirling his mustache between a great grimy thumb and forefinger. "She was a tall, queenly lady and I—yes, yes, what is it, my love?"

His little wife was tugging at his sleeve. "Pray forget your tall, queenly lady, Julius Snook," she snapped, "and try to remember that you have come home to me. Over yonder is the fire I built for you. It needs more fuel. Come! You are in the way here, my little man."

Julius scratched his head. He was turning something over in his mind.

"Humph!" grunted he, regarding the wisp of a woman with twinkling eyes. "So your fire needs more fuel, does it, Mrs. Snook? Well, I am sure you will make a very pretty blaze. So, here goes!" He stooped and threw one arm about her legs, lifted her to his mighty shoulder as if she were a feather, and strode off toward his bonfire to the accompaniment of laughter and applause. She pulled his hair,—but not viciously.

"The cloth of gold mantle," Matilde was saying as she hurried Gerane up the slope to the house, "will shine as the sun itself with these flames playing upon it from all sides. It—"

"He was very tall, Matilde, and his hair was the color of a roe-deer," panted Gerane, her eyes shining. "Only it was curly and,—yes, I must confess, it needed brushing most awfully. He was very fair, Matilde, as fair as you are, dearest. He said his father was English. Are all Englishmen fair? But you are not English, Matilde. I wonder—"

"Your mother was fair, Gerane. Many of us Austrians are fair,—yes, she was much fairer than you, my dear. Her hair was like gold."

"I have heard a great deal about the wonderful Greek gods," went on Gerane, sighing a little. "The books you have read to me and the stories that come down from—"

"You shall tell me more about this new god of yours, Gerane," interrupted Matilde drily; "but not at present. We must put our minds to the task of turning you into a fairy princess before the clock strikes twelve. Behold! They are building the biggest fire of all on the knoll over there. It is for you, my dear. And see! They are carrying more of your birthday gifts into the house. All evening long they have been coming in from the Highway to—"

"But I do not want them!" cried the girl, in a sudden passion. "I never realized before what it meant to steal things. Why, Matilde, I have always thought that these beautiful

things were ours because we fought for them and took them in battle as the old Greeks and Romans did. I never dreamed that we fell upon unsuspecting men and—"

"Hush, my child! Here comes your father."

"Yes,—I see him," cried the girl, bitterly. "And do you know what it is he is carrying in his hand? That little pouch? It contains—oh, I don't know how many rings and brooches and necklaces and,—Matilde, tell me, are they really so valuable? Are all these trinkets and gewgaws so precious?"

"Women have been known to trade their souls for the things that glitter," said the older woman sententiously. She laughed as she added with a distinct touch of irony in her voice: "But, even so, a pearl is of no value whatsoever to its original owner, the oyster. And diamonds and rubies and emeralds are nothing but pebbles until man comes along and takes them away from God."

Gerane's shoulders sagged a little. She seemed suddenly to tire, to have lost spirit and interest. A sigh escaped her lips.

"Heigh-ho! I suppose, when all is said and done, I am a robber's daughter. If the officers of the Crown were to catch me they would lock me up or behead me as they would any other evil-doer, would they not?"

"Hush! Your father will hear you."

A look of dismay, even horror, clouded her eyes. She said no more until they were in the house and she was taking off her clothes.

"My father," she murmured at last, putting her hand to her throat. "Why,—why, if they were to catch my father they would cut his head off before the next sunrise. My dear, good father! He—"

"But they will never catch him, my child," whispered Matilde, stroking her shoulder. "Have they not been trying it for thirty years and more? He bears a charmed life, your father does."

"Oh, I hope that is true. Yes, I am a robber's daughter. I am proud of it, because he is my father." Her head went up, her eyes flashed. "What a stupid fool I am! Of course I am a robber! As well try to make gold out of sawdust as for me to imagine myself anything else." She spoke recklessly. "He talks of making a lady out of me. He covers me with jewels and silks and costly furs. All of our people come down from the hills to admire me. I am the chieftain's daughter. I am, therefore, a robber. In that respect, I am no better than any other woman in the valley. I hope I am no worse. If he—"

"You are talking wildly, Gerane," admonished Matilde. "Calm yourself."

"My cousin Peter says I have more jewels than any queen in the world. Well, what of it?"

"Peter is a fool. Of course you have not."

"What of it, I say? My father bedecks me in them whenever it pleases his fancy and every one,—all of those people out there,—make believe the magicians have changed me into a princess. At least, that is the way they act. Then, the next day, what am I? The pet of all the robbers in Droon Forest. Bah! He would make a lady of me by covering my body with dresses and jewels intended for the bodies of real ladies! Is it not laughable, Matilde?"

"Your mother was a noble lady, Gerane."

"Ah, yes, but did her father bedeck and adorn her with all sorts of finery he had taken by force from—"

"Dear me, child, you have scratched your arm terribly," interrupted the other, her eyes falling upon a long, ugly abrasion on the girl's upper arm, which was exposed to view as the girl, with scant regard for consequences, angrily divested herself of the tunic.

Whereupon Gerane, suddenly remembering, felt tenderly of her thigh.

"Oh, that reminds me of my leg. I rode straight into a brier bush—is there any blood showing, Matilde? And I know I must have black and blue spots all over my—what was I saying? Oh, yes, I know. My mother's jewels and gowns, —why am I never allowed to put them on? Father keeps them locked up in that chest in there. He permits me to wear nothing but the things that have been stolen. Why is that, Matilde? Now, answer that, if you can."

"You must not forget, my dear, that everything in that chest was stolen, too. Your mother was robbed on the Highway."

"Yes, but he gave them all back to her after they were married, didn't he? They were no longer stolen property, if you please. They rightfully belong to me. They were hers to bequeath, weren't they? And didn't she on her deathbed bequeath them to me? Why, then, am I denied the privilege of wearing things that actually belong to me instead of all this rubbish that belongs to some one else?"

"Rubbish?" gasped Matilde. "You call it rubbish?"

"Please answer my question," said the girl, stamping her foot.

"I cannot answer it, my dear, because,—well, because I have never asked it myself," replied the older woman, somewhat cryptically.

"Well, it's—very—strange," muttered Gerane, as she started to strip herself of the close-fitting nether garments. "Heigh-ho! I suppose he has a very good reason for it. And if I did not love him so much I would—insist—on—an—explana—oh, ouch! What did I tell you? It is stuck fast with blood."

"Oh, the poor, beautiful white— Heavens, child! Do not jerk it off like—"

"The quicker the better," said Gerane,—and jerked. "I

am through being a highwayman," she went on with a wry grimace, surveying the scratch. "I am not cut out for one."

"Aye, it is a man's job," said Matilde, gently touching the raw, red streak. "Great hairy men with tough hides, not smooth white skins—but, come! Get out of them now, my dear. Be quick. Eljie! The warm water at once. It will feel much better after I have bathed you and rubbed you with a soothing ointment."

"Ohee! And scrub me well with sweet-smelling soap, and sprinkle me with the perfumes of Scheherazade," added Gerane, stretching her arms.

"Be still, you silly child."

Eljie came bustling in with a huge basin of warm water. They were in Gerane's own little chamber, the heavy damask curtains having been drawn tight in the narrow door that opened upon the long, commodious room that Jonifer Davos was pleased to call "headquarters" on occasion, but which was known to the household as the "big room." Matilde and Gerane, avoiding the big room, had entered the smaller chamber through a passage connecting the main house with the squat stone kitchen which, as was the custom in Graustark, stood separate and apart from the living quarters.

This chamber of Gerane's was quite small, low-ceiled, with a single casement window in the thick wall facing the west. There was little in the way of furniture; a long couch heaped high with cushions of many colors, all of them wrought from the rarest fabrics by the ingenious Matilde; two low, backless stools hewn from single blocks of wood and exquisitely carved by an artistic brigand when she was a tiny child; a small brass charcoal brazier over in one corner; a huge lantern of elaborate design and great antiquity standing in the deep recess formed by the window, below which there was a low bench covered with cushions. There was no other article of furni-

ture in the room unless one were to accept as such an incense burner that swung from the ceiling and a gypsy guitar in one corner.

The floor, however, was covered by a thick, warm-toned Persian rug of the rarest design and weave, said to have once adorned the home of a famous Caliph in Bagdad, the ancient. (A former owner bereft of this priceless carpet on the King's Highway is known to have publicly and fruitlessly offered a reward of five thousand pounds for its return, no questions asked.) To Gerane Davos, however, it was just a carpet. The best she could say for it was that it felt soft and nice and cosy to her bare feet. Nevertheless, Matilde, knowing something of rugs, invariably spread a large piece of oilskin over that portion on which the girl and the basin of warm water stood when the daily laving and anointing were ceremoniously performed.

Gerane's mother instituted this form of ablution when her child was the merest infant, and in spite of the active protestations of the wailing subject. After her death, which occurred when Gerane was less than three years of age, Matilde loyally and devotedly continued the practice. As the girl grew older she came to like these rather obligatory cleansings; she described them as "spicings" on account of the pungent scent of the toilet waters with which the bath came to a sprinkling climax and the sharp, delicious tingle they produced. And now, at nineteen, she reveled in the warm, languorous, sometimes dreamy ceremony,—for such, indeed, it had become.

The laving of the chieftain's daughter was a rite, attended only by her dead mother's companion. On rare occasions an admiring and excusably envious acolyte in the person of either Eljie or Rosa was permitted to approach the shrine bearing extra jugs or things forgotten.

On each of the four walls hung a small, priceless rug of silk, as beautiful and as shimmering as a jewel. The blood

of valiant men had been given in exchange for them. Jonifer was content to say that they had cost no more than that. He called them cheap. One of these magic little carpets covered a mirror in an old Italian frame of exquisite design. (A Doge of Venice had owned it back in the days when the world was bright.) It was never exposed to view except when Gerane made use of it while dressing her hair. She regarded it quite simply as a practical rather than an ornamental object. Indeed, she herself was wont to declare that she kept it covered up because every time she looked at it she saw her own face, and she was frightfully sick of it! A captious estimate when one stops to consider that the face it reflected was a flower of radiant and ever-changing loveliness.

There was a small door in one corner of the room; it was a low, narrow aperture that was in no sense an outlet. It was concealed behind soft yellow hangings on which mystic symbols and designs in red and blue had been imperishably stained or dyed (according to Heber Dykas, the scholar, who had seen better days) by some crafty wizard of the Nile back in the days of the Pharaohs. Beyond this doorway,—Gerane, who was of medium height, had to stoop a little in passing through it,—was located a rather capacious closet, without windows, and here were cupboards containing gowns and robes and furs that would have thrilled the soul of the most aspiring of women, but to which their present owner was happily indifferent save like all of her sex she loved the feel of them and their sensuous rustle. Indeed, she had been known to go off on a rough hunting trip into the depths of the snow-smothered forest, warmed by a rare chinchilla coat or a sable jacket of the finest quality.

And here also were two brass-bound chests containing laces, brocades, napery, lingerie fit for a queen; all manner of necklaces, stomachers, rings, bracelets; strings of pearls, jade, amber, turquoises, sapphires and what-not, all of them being

gifts from that generous and adoring highwayman, Jonifer the Hawk. He could well afford them. There were locks on these treasure chests, but no one ever thought of turning a key in them; no studded doors of oak or walnut to be bolted against would-be riflers. For, paradoxical as it may sound, there were no thieves in the Valley!

The two women could hear the muffled voices in the "big room" where the purloined wares of the luckless Mr. Mathias were being delivered as they came in.

"I suppose I am to expect another necklace or two," sighed Gerane, yawning.

Matilde paused for a moment in her operations, sat back on her heels and looked up at the face of the girl.

"A necklace or two? My dear, don't you know that you are to have every blessed thing they took this morning? It is your birthday. There will be no division. The men were positively delighted when some one suggested that your birthday gift should be—"

Gerane gave vent to a sharp, angry little laugh.

"And just for the sake of making me a birthday present they would have given all those helpless fellows bullets for breakfast," she cried. "I heard my father say as much to them. If they had made a single move to resist—bang! every one of them would have been shot dead. I don't want their birthday gift! Just think, Matilde, what might have happened if—"

"I know, my child, I know," broke in the older woman, lowering her eyes as she resumed her task. "But we cannot always be choosers, we women. Remember what the Kings of Carthage and Rome and Babylon did when they wanted to adorn the women they loved. They went out with armies and sacked the palaces of their enemies and—"

"Are you trying to make me believe that we of Droon Forest possess the divine rights of kings?" interrupted Gerane, scorn-

fully. "Have done, Matilde. We are robbers, not kings. And do you mean to tell me that this cringing, whimpering merchant Mathias is our enemy and that we stormed his stronghold to— Ouch! That is a sore spot, Matilde! Do be careful." She winced. "Mercy,—what a horrid black and blue place! Now, I wonder when that can have happened."

"It would not have happened if you had stayed at home like a sensible girl as I—"

"Ah,—but then I should not have seen"—she caught herself up quickly and then concluded—"the rich Mr. Mathias."

Jonifer called out through the curtains.

"Make haste in there, Gerane. Do not dawdle. The men have all returned. They are tired and impatient. They are gathering in front of your fire,—never have I seen such a monstrous fire,—and they are clamoring for you to appear. The feast is almost ready. Make haste, I say."

Shortly after eleven o'clock, Jonifer Davos and his daughter left the house and proceeded to the knoll on which the great birthday fire was blazing, its flames shooting into the red-shadowed air, eclipsing the stars that blinked impotently and unseen in the great dome of night. They passed through a little lane that opened up for them in the throng of eager, grinning, cheering people. At least two hundred men, women and children were present in holiday attire. The robbers themselves, clad as they were when they started off on the late expedition, minus the masks, were congregated in a knot at the base of the little hillock. Long guns were still swinging across their backs, and pistols protruded from their sashes. And each man bore in his hands or arms a bag, parcel or bundle that once had reposed in the coach of Leopold Mathias.

In the crowd were rugged, sinister-looking hunters and woodsmen drawn from far and near huts in the Forest of Droon to witness the celebration, word of which had been communicated to them by means of that strange telegraphy

supposed to be exercised only by Hindoo and Egyptian mystics.

Gerane was like a creature from another world: a solitary bird of paradise serenely strutting among frowsy barnyard fowls. Her gown, which might have been made for her but was in fact designed for and fitted to the figure of a noble young dame and had been seen at more than one royal court, —(never twice, however, at the same court!),—requires no further description than to say that it was in the fashion of the day and the product of a famed modiste in Paris. Her mantle was cloth of gold; the slippers on her small feet were golden, with buckles of diamonds (they pinched a little, to be sure, for Gerane was accustomed to sandals and comfortable instep lacings;) the rose of rubies in the velvet ribbon that bound her wavy brown hair gleamed like a burning coal blown upon by the fierce wind of an urgent bellows; and about her round white neck hung a string of gorgeous pearls. Bands of diamonds encircled both arms above the elbow, and there were rings upon her fingers. About her slim waist was the turquoise girdle. Although the midnight air of the mountains was chill, she carried and languidly waved the voluptuous fan of ostrich plumes.

Her father led her to a bench below and some distance removed from the roaring fire which waved its red, distorted banners furiously before tossing them on high to be swallowed up by the hungry gloom.

There she sat and watched the throng before her as it danced accompaniment to the weird, seductive music that for generations had roamed the land with Magyar Gypsies. For a while her eyes glowed with excitement and the thrill that stirred her blood. Then she became pensive. Her thoughts strayed afar. A little pucker settled upon her brow and those deep blue eyes of hers were clouded.

She was thinking of the gallant young officer who, as the fortune-tellers would say, had crossed her path at the dawn

of day. She found herself wondering, not for the first time that day, what had become of him. Was he safe? Was he back among his friends in Edelweiss? Worst of all, was he being blamed, perhaps punished, by his superiors? And what would he think if he could behold her now bedecked in all her stolen finery, acclaimed by the very robbers he had met the day before? What would he say to this scene of revelry and rejoicing?

The dancing ceased. She came out of her dreams with a guilty little start. Her father took her hand and drew her to her feet. She stood beside him while each smiling member of the band passed by and deposited on the ground before her his precious offering. Tiny bags and big ones, leather cases, bundles sewed up in stout hemp shrouds, small but intriguing black boxes with the seals unbroken, and two or three substantial bales that could contain nothing short of a fortune in draperies and tapestries and runners,—a goodly heap, not overlarge, but stupendous in value. She thanked each man and smiled upon him, calling him by name,—and he was amply repaid. Upon the great, lumbering Broadaxe she frowned as she shook a playful finger, and a mighty laugh went up when she chidingly reminded him of the thirty lashes he had promised her the night before. Then the feast. She had been hungry but strangely now she could not eat.

And when it was all over and she was alone in her room undressing, with the "presents" piled high against the wall opposite her couch, she fell again to thinking of the handsome stranger who had addressed her as "young sir,"—but she blushed warmly when she recalled her father's revelation in response to the young officer's question.

She wondered if by chance he was giving a thought to the insignificant little robber he had mockingly appealed to as "young sir."

CHAPTER V

A GLIMPSE OF THE WORLD OUTSIDE

Autumn ran quickly into winter, and winter, high up in this lofty cradle of the hills was as severe as it was mild on the smiling plains of Graustark, snug and complacent in the great bowl below. The strange little valley in which dwelt the robbers of Droon was more than half a mile closer to the sky than the level lands inside the rim of mountains. It was up where the winds were fierce and bitterly cold; snow, driven by the savage blasts that swept through gaps between lofty peaks, lay deep on the ground from late October till the suns of March and the rains of April turned the valley green.

Throughout those long white months the denizens of the valley, man and beast, in a sense lay dormant like the little fields about them. Hardy men, however, scoured the forests on hunting expeditions, bringing home venison and bear-meat, the wild hog, the mountain goat, and a species of large hare that abounded in the hills. There were "slaughtering times" when a limited number of pigs, steers and calves were killed, salted and put away in smoke-caves. Supplies of staple commodities sufficient to last through the winter were smuggled in before the great snow-falls practically closed the lower passes. Barnyards, cow-pens and chickenyards were kept fairly clear of snow; the beasts and fowls were comfortably sheltered in warm, thatched sheds when the winds were sharpest,—for, in the nature of things, the robbers of Droon thought more of their horses' skins than they did of their own. They loved the gallant, spirited blacks that carried them loy-

ally through many a risky enterprise. It was Julius Broadaxe who once said:

"If we did not love horseflesh so much we would have eaten it that winter when a goodly score of us starved to death. But that was before you were born, Gerane, so do not screw up that little face of yours like that. It is never going to happen again. And besides, the next time we are threatened by famine we intend to live off the fat of the land and thrive as never before. You ask me how? Well, we expect to eat all of the nice, plump little girls we can catch and— Bless me, you could not possibly understand how nourishing they are until you have devoured a couple. Of course, we will eat the pretty ones first, so you need not be worried. The famine would probably be over long before we got around to the ugly ones like you. Eh? Why, how can I help laughing when you keep on giggling like that?"

"I cannot help laughing," said small Gerane from the bench on which she sat in his forge, swinging her feet in an ecstasy of enjoyment, "when I think of you swallowing me like Jonah swallowed the whale."

"Jonah did not swallow the whale. You should study your Bible a little more carefully, young lady. It was—"

"Oh, dear, how I do get the fairy stories mixed," said she. "Matilde reads so many of them to me I simply cannot keep track of them."

All winter long the women sewed and mended; the children plodded to the little school where they were taught by Dykas, the scholar; the men did the necessary out-door jobs by day and at night sat about the deep stone fireplaces in which huge logs snapped and sang as blithely and as willingly as they would have done had they been warming the shins and soles of godly men instead of comforting those of drowsy robbers who, after a fashion, were merely hibernating. And there, by night, these terrors of the King's Highway smoked their

pipes, drank their wines, spun their yarns, and were as peaceable a lot of unhung rogues as you could find in all the world.

They were fatalists, these robbers of Droon Forest. Long before their fathers became thieves and raiders and still were the spiritless, sullen descendants of the gallant men who with their women had found refuge here from the wrath of the Duke's brother, this little valley was as secret a place as it was in these days of Jonifer the Hawk. There was but one way to enter and that was carefully guarded. So far, no man had been able to overcome the insurmountable difficulties that made it impossible to reach the summits of the surrounding peaks and thereby be in a position to look down into the sequestered vale thousands of feet below.

Therefore, argued the robbers of Droon,—like all good fatalists who feel themselves secure from harm,—what was the sense of worrying about cannon-balls that never were fired?

So there were peace and contentment and serenity in the stronghold of Jonifer the Hawk,—but, alack, none of these in the heart of the father of Gerane. He was troubled and bewildered by the change that had come over the girl.

"She has never been like this before," he grumbled to Matilde, repeating the observation so often as the days went by that she began to feel sorry for him, as one might for a tortured beast in travail. "I cannot understand it, Matilde. What do you suppose has happened?"

Usually these questions, indicative of the disturbed condition of his mind, were due to inexplicable spells of moodiness on the part of his daughter. She, who had always been as gay as the lark, as blithe as the mountain rill, to have suddenly become so glum and listless as to cause people to wonder what ailed her was—well, it was all very puzzling and irritating to Jonifer. Not once but a hundred times he declared that he could not understand it. And Matilde, who knew what the

matter was, patiently assured him over and over again that she could not understand it either.

"Do you think she is ill?" he was wont to inquire in an undertone, studying the pensive face of the girl from a distance as she gazed dreamily into the fire or out of the window. "She looks well. Truth to tell, I never saw her looking better. It seems to me she gets prettier all the time. But why does she mope about the place as if she had the vapors or the megrims or what you will?"

And more than once the gaunt spinster who had come to the glen in bondage with Gerane's mother,—and miraculously had remained a spinster ever since because Jonifer Davos not only loved his dead wife too well to take another in her place but would have cut his own heart out rather than have her daughter brought up by a concubine,—more than once she had reminded him that Gerane was a woman and no longer a child. To which Jonifer would gloomily respond.

"Yes, I suppose that may explain it. Women are so cursed secretive. You never know what they are thinking. They're like cats. I've seen that old cat of ours sit for hours looking at nothing—but it was thinking all the time, you may be sure, and thinking of things that were in the dark to all the rest of us. Cats can see in the dark. So can women, not in just the same way of course, but still they see things that a man cannot see. You may be right. My baby has turned into a woman, and she's seeing things in the dark."

"I think Gerane needs a change, Jonifer," said Matilde, one day. "She has lived to be nineteen years of age. That is a long time for a child to be in prison."

"Prison? What do you mean, woman?"

"You know what I mean," said she, significantly.

"Why,—why, this is a—sort of Garden of Eden," he expostulated, and repeated himself defensively: "A perfect Garden of Eden."

"Nevertheless Adam and Eve got tired of theirs and went forth into the wilderness," she said, with a shake of her head. "And besides, man, have you ever read anywhere that the Garden of Eden was buried in snow for five months of the year?"

"Now you are beginning to argue like a woman, Matilde."

"I grant you that. But Eve was a woman, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was, and she would have been better off if she'd stayed in the Garden of—"

"Now you are beginning to argue like a man, Jonifer. What I mean to say in plain words is that Gerane has been locked up in this valley all her life. It is a prison. It is not a Garden of Eden to her. She is dreaming all the time of the world that lies beyond those mountains. She is dreaming of the people out there, of the cities, the oceans, the rivers, the pleasures, the—oh, I could go on for hours."

"Have I not promised her that one day she is to go out into the world and—"

"You promised her that when she was a child. She believed you then. She is a woman now. She does not believe you."

Jonifer stared at her blankly.

"Does not believe me,—say that again, woman," he stammered, unwilling to trust his ears.

"It isn't necessary," she retorted. "The fact remains that she is past nineteen, able to think for herself and act for herself, and she has not been outside the valley more than half-a-dozen times in her whole life. And then only like a thief in the night,—cautiously, stealthily, and in the company of thieves."

"God above us, madam!" gasped Jonifer, his face purpling. "What words are these—aha! I begin to see! You have been putting notions into her head. You—"

"On the contrary, Jonifer Davos," she interrupted coolly, "it is you who put these notions into her head, years ago."

"You—you spoke of thieves, madam," he sputtered. "You say this to my teeth, you—"

"And what else are you?" she inquired, lifting her eyebrows.

Jonifer sank back in his chair, rather limply for him.

"I would have you remember, madam," he began, hoarsely, "that my great-grandfather was the Duke of Droon and—"

She did not hesitate. "Aye, and he tried to steal a throne, did he not?"

For a moment or two he regarded her balefully. Then he turned his eyes away.

"He was no worse than the Duke of Monmouth you speak about so kindly," he muttered. "You are always harping on the wrongs of—"

"If it will ease your mind any, Jonifer, I will confess that some of my mother's ancestors served in Monmouth's cause. I suppose I am prejudiced, even though all this happened ages ago and I am an Austrian. Forgive me for speaking so plainly to you about thieves. But I am thinking more of Gerane. She knows, my friend, that she is a robber's daughter. Oh, yes, plain words,—but the truth. She has gentle blood in her veins. She has the heart and soul and, I grant you, the temper of a lady. You have the blood of a noble duke in your veins; her mother—my poor Louise"—her voice trembled a little —"her mother was as well-born as any woman in Austria. Gerane comes by the heritage of blood honestly. And yet, my friend, she spends her life here and she consorts with thieves and robbers. I call it a prison, because, when all is said and done, that is the place generally supposed to be filled with thieves."

"But she loves me, she respects me—" began Jonifer, lamely. "And, curse you for a sentimental fool," he went on, flaring up, "am I not providing a fortune that will insure her the highest position in—"

"You might do better by her, Jonifer, if you gave her a glimpse now and then of the thing she covets more than all the riches you are hoarding up for her."

"You mean—the world outside?"

"That is what I do mean."

Jonifer was silent. His brow darkened with thought. For a long time he sat, staring into the fire. Gerane, he knew, was off exercising Selim in the road from which the snow had been scooped. He could speak without reserve.

"Her mother was content to live here with me," he said at last. "She loved me. She did not despise me because I am a—" he stopped short.

"A robber," concluded Matilde, succinctly.

"Aye,—a robber. So be it. Nevertheless she loved me. Now, that was strange, was it not?" He eyed her mockingly, triumphantly.

She leaned forward. "I wonder if you forget how she despised you at first, Jonifer Davos."

He smiled. "Aye, that is true. But she got over it in good time. She loved me, and—well, you know, Matilde."

"Yes, I know," she said darkly. "I know you loved her. That is what made it possible for her to go on living. She confessed to you with her own lips that many a time she would have killed herself if I had not stopped her, holding out the hope that we would be rescued. She was afraid of your father. She—oh, I am sorry."

He hung his head suddenly. She had struck a tender spot, she had found the crack in his armor. He well remembered the terror of that beautiful captive,—the same terror that had filled the souls of other hapless women who had been seized and carried off into the hills by Jonifer the First, who was a conscienceless lover as well as a hater of women. His mind leaped backward to the day when he stood before his father and defied him, going so far as to say he would kill

him as he would a snake if he so much as laid an evil hand upon the proud young Austrian whose fortitude was beginning to crumble before the unholy demands of the robber chieftain. He would never forget his father's fury nor his sudden, unexampled humility, nor would he ever forget the look of wonder and joy in Louise's face when she realized that she had found a resolute, unsuspected ally and defender in the person of her tormentor's son. He had loved her for weeks,—since the moment he first laid eyes upon her, in fact,—and that hour perhaps witnessed all unknown to her the dawn of the love she finally gave unreservedly to him.

And later on his father had said to him: "My son, you would have slain me last night? You would have killed your own father?"

Always he would remember his reply: "Yes, father, I would have killed you."

Whereupon his father had laid his hand upon his shoulder and had said to him: "I would like you to know, Jonifer, that I am proud of you. You are a gentleman."

All this was years ago, but now Jonifer the Hawk hung his head. A certain shame surged up with the memory of those days. If he had been a gentleman he would have defended other women before Louise. That was the crack in his armor, the tender spot in his pride. Presently he lifted his head and spoke.

"You hate me, Matilde?"

She did not look away. "Yes," she replied steadily. "I have always hated you, Jonifer."

He was silent for a long time, studying her face. "I suppose that is why I have always esteemed you, Matilde," he said at last. "Strange, is it not, that I should respect you when I know that you hate me as you would poison?"

"It is not strange," she said, and he nodded his head. She went on calmly: "I would have shot you and then myself the

day she died and did not need me any longer if there had been no Gerane for me to live for and cherish. That is all that saved your life, Jonifer,—Louise's baby."

The great Jonifer swallowed something that had come up in his throat and then rather brusquely resumed the topic that had been disturbing him.

"I cannot understand her at all. She used to be like sunshine, never a cross word,—that is, unless she were in a tantrum and that wasn't often,—singing and laughing and as lively as a cricket. Now what happens? She sulks and goes off and sits by herself half the time. She is peevish and,—damn me, —she's got everybody in the valley thinking that I mistreat her. Only yesterday Julius Snook's wife,—she's got the tongue of a devil,—only yesterday she stopped me and shook her finger in my face and said I ought to be ashamed of myself. Now, by all the saints, what have I to be ashamed of? I mean, so far as Gerane is concerned?"

"Would you be willing to accept a little advice from me, Jonifer?"

"I am willing to listen to it," said he, guardedly.

"Well, why don't you take her to Edelweiss once in a while. Let her see the people, the bazaars, the lights, the gay equipages, the—the soldiers in their uniforms—"

"That isn't advice," expostulated he. "That is sheer idiocy. Are you forgetting the risk, the danger?"

"Oh, I think you could manage it if you put your mind to it," she said, rather sharply. "You do not hesitate to go to the city whenever you feel inclined,—and you always come home safely, don't you?"

"I never go except on business," said he stiffly.

"Well, you might make it your business to see that Gerane gets a little pleasure out of life. That is all I have to say, Jonifer Davos. Do as you like about it. But do not com-

plain if she withers up like a rose before she has had a chance to come to full bloom."

"Wait a moment," he muttered as she started to leave the room. "It has just occurred to me that there are frolics every night or so at Digman's Inn. Parties coming out from the city by sledge to spend the night and go hunting the next day. Seege tells me they are very gay. A goodly number of the nobility, the nabobs, men and women, come out to make merry over their wine and—"

"That is better than nothing at all," she interjected, her face lighting up. "Take her to Digman's Inn one night and allow her to look on, Jonifer. No one will suspect the honest-looking farmer and his starry-eyed daughter of being the terrible creatures that—well, that you really are."

"And there is another thing," began Jonifer, taking a new tack. "She absolutely refuses to have anything to do with all those gorgeous things we gave her the night of her birthday. The men cannot understand it. She says she will not accept the—the rubbish. That was the word,—rubbish."

"I know. She threw your little bag of pearls and diamonds on the floor and—well, you know what followed."

"Yes," growled the perplexed brigand. "She stamped on them. Curse me, I cannot see what's got into the girl."

"It would not surprise me if she considered herself rich enough as it is, Jonifer," said she, with a baffling smile, and left him staring, chewing the end of his big mustache.

Matilde, being a woman, had guessed Gerane's secret. She sensed the cause of her silences, her moods, the sometimes sullen anger that clouded her lovely eyes. And down in her heart she pitied the girl because of the hunger that seemingly could not be appeased.

Quite well she knew that Gerane had fallen in love with the captain of dragoons she had seen but once on the King's High-

way. More than that, thought Matilde, wisely and bitterly, she had fallen in love with the great outside world as it was revealed to her in the person of a solitary individual wearing a portion at least of the dazzling uniform of the army.

Matilde sighed. She had known many a swaggering army officer in her day; the plumage did not deceive her.

The result of these frequent discussions with Matilde, to say nothing of the effect produced upon him by the dark looks of his people as well as the incomprehensible behavior of his daughter, was a decision on Jonifer's part,—arrived at after long deliberation and many misgivings,—to take her down to the ancient inn of the Digmans on a certain crisp, starlit evening when a party of Edelweiss merrymakers were to spend the night preliminary to a day's hunting in which both men and women were to participate. He arranged in advance for accommodations for the night, staggering the gigantic Digmans out of a year's growth, to quote the astounded Seege.

"But, Jonifer, suppose some one happens to recognize you," protested Samon, his big jaw sagging. "It is madness,—absolute madness. Are you losing your mind? Is the fox forgetting its—"

Davos interrupted him haughtily, coldly. "Have done, Samon. Do you think that I would put my daughter's head in the lion's mouth? Nor have you any need to fear for your own precious heads, big as they are and as empty as we all know them to be. We come to you as strangers. You do not know who we are. You put us up for the night as you would any wayfarer on the road,—and that is all you have to do with it. Your heads are safe, no matter what happens to mine. They come to-morrow night, you say? How many?"

"A full score," replied Samon, hoping that would discourage the brigand chief.

"One count, two barons and at least one gentleman of the bedchamber," added Seege, confidentially.

Jonifer laughed. "They do not frighten me, Seege. Now, if you had said ladies-in-waiting or mistresses-of-the-wardrobe, —well, that would be something to worry about. Besides, what the devil do you mean by speaking of gentlemen of the bedchamber? Don't you know that the royal young orphan at the Castle is a girl of ten or thereabouts?"

"Seege means an equerry," explained Samon. "And in the party there will also be several sport-loving gentlemen from the Citadel."

"We forgot to mention a couple of foreign gentlemen who may be attached to the Secret Service for all we know, Jonifer."

"To say nothing of eight or ten ladies and quite a number of servants and gunbearers," concluded Samon, with a gesture that definitely dismissed the whole project from his and Jonifer's minds without possibility of its ever coming up again.

"My daughter will occupy the rear room in the wing facing the courtyard," said Jonifer bluntly. "It will be quite handy in case there should be any occasion for haste. I shall not sleep, Samon."

And so it came to pass that late the next afternoon Gerane, peering from a dim casement window overlooking the courtyard, witnessed the arrival of four or five zanobans (sleighs) on great curving runners drawn by spirited four-horse teams from whose flaring nostrils issued clouds of breath. Bells jingled, drivers shouted, stable-boys scurried, and there was such a clamor that the wide-eyed observer was fairly bewildered,—she who had known nothing but the clash and clatter of men and horses engaged in sinister enterprises.

Edelweiss, whence came these pleasure-seeking, sport-loving men and women, lay more than fifty miles to the southeast. Fresh horses had been taken on at the military post some six or seven leagues from Digman's Inn, and the course over the

level road that skirted the foothills had been covered in less than five hours.

With shining eyes, Gerane watched one after another of these gaudy sleighs circle the courtyard and draw up with a great flourish before the portals of the Inn where the occupants were welcomed by the gigantic hosts, to whom everybody addressed the jaunty, bantering remarks of old and familiar customers. The servility of the terrifying Digmans, the alacrity and courtesy of the usually slothful servants, the soldier-like precision and manners of the drivers and outriders,—all of these manifestations filled Gerane's soul with wonder. She was getting her first whiff of the glory that scented the world of her dreams.

Her keenest interest was for the rosy-faced, laughing, chattering women who were assisted in alighting by gallant gentlemen who—but Gerane could not stir up much enthusiasm over the men. They were clumsy, bulky creatures in huge fur coats and caps, and most of them were bearded, undersized individuals lacking, save only in courtliness, all of the princely qualities with which her imagination had endowed them. Not one of them could compare with—still, she was forced to admit, the captain of dragoons had not been handicapped by a great fur coat and a massive cap that covered his head from crown to chin. There were two or three tall fellows, to be sure, but, even so, they were by no means as handsome or as —but, then, who *could* be?

The women, on the other hand, were gay, vivacious, sprightly; most of them were pretty and, with two noticeable exceptions, quite petite. She herself was taller than any of the women in the valley save Matilde, but—and there was something wistful in her brief calculations—was she as tall as either of these stately dames? Would any one be likely to mistake them for slim, boyish "young sirs" if he came upon them in the uncertain light of early morn dressed as she had been?

They were all clad in sable or sealskin coats, with caps of the same fur; but Gerane eyed these splendid garments with supreme indifference. They meant little or nothing to her.

She was still sitting at the window long afterward, gazing at the busy scene in the stableyard, when her father entered the room. Dusk had fallen; men were unharnessing and stabling the horses by lantern-light. The jingle of bells came to her ears through the open window. She was thrilled. Never had she listened to the music of sleigh-bells before.

"Come, Gerane," said Jonifer, touching her shoulder. She started violently. "It is time to go in to supper."

"How you frightened me," she exclaimed, springing to her feet, her hand to her heart.

He drew back, astonished. "Now, by all—come, come, my dear; this will never do. You are nervous, excited. Frightened? By me?" He put his arm about her shoulders. "Bless me, is this the girl who is not afraid of the roar of the lion or the—"

"But I have never been in such a tight place as this before," she broke in whimsically, with a little laugh in her throat. "Oh, how big and strong you are, father," she went on, cuddling close to him as if for the protection his mighty frame insured. "Who could be afraid with you about?"

Jonifer was pleased. He held her close. His chest swelled.

"Be not afraid, my lamb. Neither man nor beast can harm you while I am about." Then, as if on second thought: "No, nor woman either, if that will comfort you. But come, light the candles. You must make yourself look as pretty as—"

"I am ready, father. No one will notice the ugly little peasant girl over in the corner." She drew his head down and kissed him. "Oh, how good you are to let me come."

He growled: "The ugly little peasant girl, eh? Well, now curse me for a—"

A gong, pealing dully in some remote corner of the old

inn, interrupted what promised to develop into a withering estimate of womankind in general as compared to Gerane in particular.

His daughter's hands tightened their grip on his arm.

"Heaven save us! Is—is it a danger signal?" she whispered.

Jonifer chuckled. "Aye, so it is, my baby. It means the deadliest peril to all those gentlemen of Edelweiss. It means dismay to all their ladies." He spoke with pardonable boastfulness. "Because, my dear, they are about to behold you for the first time,—and God help them all."

Whereupon Gerane, with the primeval perversity of her sex, decided after all to light the candles. Her father watched her with silent admiration and a curious sort of arrogance as she deftly tucked in a few rebellious locks. He cocked his head this way and that way, unconsciously following the example she set as she took stock of herself in the glass. Her eyes caught his in the mirror, and she smiled back at them,—a wistful, forlorn little smile that caused his heart suddenly to contract. From the bottom of his soul he wished it were possible to take her in before all these lordly strangers arrayed like the Queen of Sheba,—he could think of no one else in all history so dazzlingly, magnificently splendid as that well-sung lady,—but, alas, that satisfaction was denied him. He sighed deeply. But, thought he, the time would come when she could strut haughtily among these peacocks.

"Am I all right, father?" she asked.

"Never in all my life," vouchsafed he, "have I seen a maiden so fair to look upon as this farmer's daughter who—who is about to blow out the candles. Come, my dear,—blow them out. And remember, if you please, that you are now a simple country lass, and that I am an honest but prosperous yokel dressed up in his 'best market-day clothes.'"

"With a pair of pistols tucked inside his coat," said she gayly, and blew out the candles.

Except for a couple of strangers, peddlers no doubt, they were the first to enter the *salle à manger*, taking their seats at a table just inside the door. Jonifer had thought of this. He wanted to be near the exit. The room was not a large one, accommodating three or four small tables at either end and a long, narrow board in the center, arranged to seat a number of people. The small tables were meagerly set with simple china dishes, pewter-ware and copper tankards. There was a lighted candle on each of these tables; huge brass lanterns hung suspended from the wall in the four corners of the rather lofty room. The center table, as was quite proper, contained the best that the inn afforded in the way of plate, china, pottery and napery; there were silver goblets, richly ornamented flagons, and three tall candelabra, each with a spread of eight tallow-smelling torches. The ancient walls, now covered by a more or less modern coat of plaster which bore many cracks and repairs, were grimy with age and lack of attention; cobwebs, thick with dust and evidently beyond reach of reed brushes even if wielded by such towering persons as the two Digmans had they been minded to exercise them (and they were not, being lazy as most giants are), seemed for all the world, to serve a definite purpose in binding the walls and the beamed ceiling together so that they could not fall apart. The floor was constructed of small stone slabs, worn smooth and undulating by the shuffling of feet and the scrubbings of a century and a half or more.

An appealing odor of roast game came from the kitchen off the far end of the room, mingled with the smell of breadstuffs baking, the pungent scent of spices and the warm aroma of steaming broths. Gerane, who had not been hungry up to this moment, was suddenly aware of an acute longing for food. The savory odors were irresistible.

Jonifer and his daughter sat down at the scoured old table in the corner and waited. They could hear men's voices

issuing from the door of the tap-room just beyond the big fireplace which faced the long center table. Huge logs were blazing on brass andirons lately polished for the occasion. Now and then the booming guffaws of one of the Digmans could be heard above the comparatively feeble laughter of the gentlemen from Edelweiss.

The landlords of the inn seldom entered the dining-room. It embarrassed them to stoop in order to pass through the door.

The food, as usual, was to be served by ancient retainers who had been in the service of the hostelry for many years, while the cellarer in his leathern jacket and girdle of keys was a wizened, wrinkled old man whose boast was that he had poured wine more than once into the vast flagon of the merry Prince Rudovic some three score years ago.

Presently the gay, chattering party from Edelweiss appeared. There was much laughter and bustle as they found their places at the long table; and jovial shouts brought three or four tardy ones from the tap-room.

First of all, Gerane's eyes sought out the two tall men she had observed in the courtyard. She did not know whether to feel disappointed or relieved by the discovery that neither of them was the unforgettable captain of dragoons. With this off her mind, she was able to devote her attention to the women, and here a real disappointment awaited her. She had expected to find them beautifully, gorgeously gowned in low-necked dresses; instead, they were attired in what seemed to her to be most unattractive, rough-looking, even ill-fitting costumes. They looked as if they had either just come in from a long tramp in the woods or were on the point of starting out to take one. It was some time before she was able to reconcile herself to the fact that they had come to Droon Forest for no other purpose than to shoot hares and other game in the morning.

True, there were many bright, gaudy colors distributed

among the collection of belted blouses, but even so Gerane was not dazzled. The men were decidedly more worth while to her eyes. They were, on the whole, a dashing, clean-looking lot, and they wore clothes that left the robber's daughter in no condition of doubt as to their standing in Edelweiss. With half an eye she could see that they were "nabobs" (Jonifer's term of classification) and was duly but not profoundly impressed.

She took to eyeing the women covertly. Some of them were quite pretty, others were far from it. But, she was bound to admit, there was an air about all of them, a certain ease and assurance, that stamped them as "ladies of high degree" (again quoting Jonifer). There could be no possible doubt about that. They were "ladies of high degree."

There was a great deal of merriment at the long table. Everybody was laughing and talking. The servitors practically ignored the other four guests of the inn in their endeavors to please the "nabobs" and their companions. The cellarer was busy filling goblets with blood-red wine; and when he was not doing that he was replenishing tall flagons at the bar outside.

Suddenly it dawned upon Gerane that many a masculine eye was regarding her with interest. She felt her cheeks grow warm; an ominous little frown darkened her eyes as she lowered them,—and finally she kept them lowered all the time, for it was not long before men were turning their heads to stare at her and women were following their example. All at once a feeling of panic assailed her. She felt her cheeks grow cold. Under her breath she spoke to her father:

"They are all looking at me. Do you think they recognize me? Shall we get out? They may pounce upon us at any moment."

Jonifer grinned as he shook his head ever so slightly. "Rest assured, my girl. They do not know who you are, but they

will never forget you. When the time comes for you to take your place among them they will be sure to recognize and remember you as the girl they saw here to-night with her uncle, a respectable farmer who is escorting her to the railway after the fortnight's visit she has paid him and his family."

"What is that you say?" she almost gasped. "My uncle? I do not understand you."

"Take a sip of wine, my dear," he urged in a low tone. "Act as unconcerned as possible. That's better. Aye, your uncle,—that is who I am for the time being. And for the time being you are the daughter of my dead wife's brother, a prosperous landowner in Silesia. At least, that is what the Digmans and their servants are instructed to say when questions are asked. You may be sure that questions are being—see? That fellow at the top of the table is asking old Tammas who you are at this very moment."

"But, father, I do not—"

"It would not be meet and fitting for you to say to these people when you go among them in all your silks and satins and jewels that the man they saw with you to-night is your father. You will say to them that he is your uncle. You will say to them, and so will your Aunt Katrane, that your father was a rich gentleman of Silesia while he lived but that he died and left you all his—"

"I refuse! I refuse to—" she began, hotly, actually horrified by the suggestion. She had caught the wistful, beaten look in her father's eyes.

He checked her with a low, imperative "Ssh! Be careful! Time enough to discuss all this and in a less public place. This is my plan. I am not a tyrant, however. The decision will rest with you, my dear."

"My mind is made up now," she muttered.

"Certainly," said he calmly. "And you can change it as easily as any other woman."

Gerane shook her head and smiled. She dismissed the subject from her mind without further ado and gave her thoughts to the banqueters. Her shyness left her and in its place came a queer, indefinable something that might have been described as a challenge to these inquisitive lords and ladies. That momentary thrill of alarm was gone. Curiously, she was amused. After all, it was good fun to be attracting the attention and perhaps the admiration of—well, that gray-mustached old sportsman with the red rosette on his breast, for example.

But before long she began to lose interest in the scene. She did not know it, to be sure, but she was bored. It was rather tiresome, merely looking on like this. Besides, it was past her bedtime. She yawned. Jonifer did not see her the first time. He had been silent for a long time, his gaze fixed moodily on the fire, a tankard of ale poised in his hand. Then he noticed the droop of her long lashes and took note of the difficulty she was having in keeping her eyelids raised. She yawned again, very delicately,—under the intent gaze of at least three gentlemen,—and this time he saw her. She smiled apologetically.

"I am awfully tired and sleepy, father," she murmured.

"Uncle," said he.

"Father," said she.

"Have you had enough of this?"

"Alas, I fear so. That is to say, I've had enough for tonight."

"Then, off to bed you go."

He called for his account, paid it after apparently disputing the amount, and conducted his daughter from the room. He did not speak until they came to her door.

"Get what sleep you can," he whispered. "We must be away from this place before dawn."

"I don't feel as much like Cinderella as I thought I would," said she.

"Cinderella? Who is she?"

"You wouldn't know. She is some one Matilde has told me about."

Shortly before five o'clock the next morning, two masculine figures stole out from a side door of the inn and moved swiftly, stealthily across the snow-packed courtyard in the direction of the stable. In the first dull gray light of dawn they appeared as vague, murky blotches as they hugged the even darker shadow of the low stone wall; but it could be seen that one was tall and carried a bundle, while the other, much shorter, walked with mincing steps. They entered the stable and, after pausing for a few seconds just inside the door to get their bearings from the faint light coming through a window, moved quickly, unerringly to a certain spot in the rear wall. Their movements were swift, cautious, for they knew that in the mow overhead several strange hostlers were sleeping. The tall one, after fumbling for a moment or two, found what he was after; a heavy plank slid to one side, revealing a narrow, black aperture in the wall, through which the short one passed, to be immediately followed by the other. Then the plank slid quickly but noiselessly back into place.

Over in a far corner of the long carriage room there was a slight stir. A man who had been lying on a pile of sacks near the foot of the ladder leading to the mow scrambled to his feet, rubbed his eyes and squinted intently. Then with a muttered ejaculation of astonishment and incredulity, he advanced slowly, even fearfully, to the place where the figures had magically vanished into what looked to be the most solid of walls. He searched his pocket and produced a sulphur match, which he scratched on his trouser-leg. A few seconds passed before the uncertain blue flame caught the wood, and was transformed into a steady, illuminating flare of white. The mystified hostler, now wide awake, held the match close to the timbers and—

A noise behind caused him to turn his head. The next

instant the huge hand of Seege Digman smote him full upon the back of the neck. He went down as if struck by a sledge-hammer and, save for a passing quiver, he never moved again. His neck was broken. Seege picked him up with one hand and made sure of the job by calmly twisting the limp head until it faced the spine, first one way and then the other. Satisfied that here was a fellow who would tell no tales, he carried him over to the foot of the ladder and dropped him. (Half an hour later a sleepy occupant of the mow, descending the ladder, came upon the body, and all that day his fellows talked in subdued tones about the fate of poor Jakob who fell through the hole in the loft and broke his neck while walking in his sleep.)

Gerane, unaware of the grewsome tragedy that had taken place while she waited not ten feet away until her father found and lighted a lantern, went home in a vastly more contented frame of mind. She was, in truth, quite gay during the ride through the canyon and across the meadows. Her father was delighted. She was more like herself,—the old self,—than she had been in weeks.

But if he could have seen her looking at herself in the mirror, not once but many times that day, his delight would have been tempered somewhat by the uneasy conviction that she had become vain all of a sudden and exceedingly well pleased with herself. However, he could not have sensed the true cause of her secret exultation. Behind it lay the discovery that she was, after all, rather good-looking,—quite surprisingly so, in fact, if any one of those women at the inn was to be accepted as a standard.

CHAPTER VI

THE THREE GYPSIES

THEN, at last, came Spring. A smiling April sun peeped over the mountain peaks down into the valley, lavishly spreading his warmth over field and slope as he began his annual task of splashing the world with fresh green paint; with becoming grace he hid behind the clouds whenever the stark landscape took its virginal bath in the showers sent down by Pluvius. Soon the earth, shedding its coat of ermine, came forth in a fluttering gossamer of emerald hue and burst into melody, singing with all its heart from morn till night. The fields were alive with men who ripped away the emerald sheet with plowshare and hoe and spade and then leaned back to watch the black and brown waste they had wrought made green again by the sorcery that baffles all understanding. Flowers opened their eyes and peeped up at the lofty trees that were standing straight and imperturbable when they went to sleep long months before; bees came to kiss them and, like robbers, stole their gold ere they passed along; men and women in great wooden shoes trampled upon them,—but, dying, they too sang the Song of Spring.

And lucky were the favored ones that died in Gerane's hair or on her breast, for their unheard song was of the love she bore for them.

There were no song birds in the high valley. Only eagles, hawks, great owls, vampire bats and strange birds of evil omen that feared not the lonely solitudes of the forest nor were to be daunted by the lofty journey over the mountain tops. And many a wondering, intrepid baby rabbit rode off to the crags

in the talons of these feathered marauders because of its temerity in venturing forth from leafy strongholds to view the sunlit world. Time and again eagles, swooping down, had carried off half-grown pigs; and once a child sailed away to an aerie among the crags but not on the back of a monster bird as the fairy tales would have it.

Spring came and found Jonifer still in a maze of perplexity. He was as much in the dark as ever concerning his daughter's condition of mind, and, he was beginning to feel, her state of health. Secretly he suspected that some unknown witch of the forest had cast a spell upon her. All very well for Matilde to argue that she was no longer a child, that she was a woman now with thoughts and problems of her own. That was not the explanation. There was something else. But when he asked Gerane,—as he did more than once,—what the devil was the matter with her, she had a way of looking annoyed and tartly assuring him that nothing at all was the matter.

He had looked for a change with the coming of Spring—but no, if anything she was more pensive, given more to dreamy silences, less prone to seek his counsel and advice, and damnably (the word is his) inclined to frown in a far-off manner when there was nothing at all to frown at, so far as he could see.

Twice after that first visit she accompanied him to Digman's Inn, and they spent two nights and a day in the city of Edelweiss, together with her cousin Peter, the three of them being disguised as gypsies.

This visit to the walled city occurred in the early Summer. They entered the West Gate at sunset. The night air, unlike that in the high hills, was soft and balmy. Thousands of people were in the streets; there were lamps on every corner and in many of the shop-windows; the Hotel Regengetz was ablaze with light and there was a Czech orchestra playing at one end of the long veranda; carriages and open barouches

drove up to the hotel and discharged gayly-dressed women and smart-looking men, many of the latter in uniform; everybody was in good humor, even Baron Dangloss's policemen from the Tower, who were to be seen everywhere.

All this was an every day, every night occurrence so far as the citizens of Edelweiss were concerned, but to Gerane,—and to a certain degree Peter,—it was a spectacle, a pageant, a scene never to be forgotten. The girl's eyes were glowing with excitement and a curious sort of ecstasy; time and again she caught herself holding her breath and put her hand to her heart to still its noisy hammering. She was not afraid, she was not timid, as she had been at the outset. Here she was, sauntering carelessly through the crowded streets, in the company of two men on whose heads the Crown had put a price, and she was not afraid.

Sometimes she actually found herself wondering,—and not without a certain tingle of bravado,—what these good, honest people would do if they were suddenly to discover that it was no other than the dreaded, blood-thirsty scourge of the Inn of the Hawk and Raven they walked beside and jostled. And what would be the sensations of those silly young bloods if they were told that the gypsy girl they ogled admiringly was the daughter of Jonifer the Hawk?

Peter, at such times, was puzzled by her mischievous smile. Being a man and a thief he was not so easy in his mind as she. He was wondering how long it would be before the heavy hand of a policeman fell upon his shoulder.

They were picturesque gypsies, these three. Their faces were stained brown, their garments were shabby but gaudy, their manner as insolent and as contemptuous as that of any vagabond whose home and estate took in most of the highways and byways in the world. Jonifer, a red kerchief wound about his head, wore a sinister but at the same time rather intriguing black patch strung over one eye; and, for the occasion,

he had gallantly sacrificed the long, pointed ends of his famous mustache. A yellow and black kerchief loosely knotted at the back, crowned Gerane's head; the tattered red skirt which reached but little below her knees was trimmed with spangles and tawdry braids of gold; her shawl was black. And her dark, lustrous eyes, softly radiant in their dusky setting, were —ah, well, is it any wonder that Jonifer Davos and Peter glowered occasionally?

As they drew near the broad steps leading up to the hotel, on one of their turns about Regengetz Circus, Jonifer suddenly stopped and drew his daughter into the shadow of the building. A tall, beautifully dressed lady was being handed out of her carriage by a lean, aristocratic gentleman. He bent his head and whispered in Gerane's ear.

Gerane nodded her head, speechless. She had seen her titled aunt but once and under vastly different circumstances: one night on the road to Ganlook ten years before, and the lady had raised her veil to kiss her on the cheek.

"She keeps her figure well," mused Jonifer aloud.

"She is beautiful," whispered Gerane, staring.

"I have heard that her mother was beautiful,—very beautiful."

"How funny! You are speaking of your own mother."

Jonifer shrugged his shoulders, that was all. The Countess and Jabassy entered the hotel and were lost to view.

"Who was that?" queried Peter.

"A lady to whom you are related by accident," replied Jonifer, carelessly.

Peter turned red under his stain of brown. An ugly glitter came into his eyes. He knew what his uncle meant by "accident"; it was a sarcastic way of reminding him that neither he nor his father,—nor his two brothers for that matter,—had been born in wedlock.

He hated Jonifer Davos. He was brought up by his mother

to hate the half-brother of the man who was his father. Never was he allowed to forget that his mother was not a wife, nor was his grandmother any better off in that respect. He had no right to the name of Davos. Other people called him and his brother by the name of Davos, but not Jonifer. To that lordly individual the three bastards were simply Peter and Joseph and Matthew; they were without a surname so far as he was concerned. And yet, down in his rebellious breast, Peter knew that Jonifer was fond of him, trusted him, sometimes deferred to him,—for Peter was strong and brave and faithful. He hated Jonifer for being kind to him!

But he did not hate his lovely cousin. On the contrary, he loved her, he coveted her. Some day—ah, would that day ever come? If Jonifer were only out of the way! Suddenly, like a blinding flash, came the thought that staggered him. Suppose some one were to steal into his uncle's room that very night and plunge a knife into his breast while he slept! Something like that! Who would know, who could say that,—but as quickly came the revolt. Jonifer was his master, his chief, his lord; he was a fair man and just in all his dealings. And twice, Peter remembered, his life had been saved by this loyal chieftain. Murder him? No! He was not a Judas. And now, strange to say, he hated himself.

They spent the night in a lodging-house near the West Gate, a place frequently patronized by gypsies, who were not permitted to bring their caravans into the city, and by such humble wayfarers as chanced to pass that way. The landlord, however, was very particular about the character of his guests. Among other things, he boasted that he would not accommodate or entertain thieves! And, he maintained, he could tell a thief on sight.

Gerane slept in a tiny room near the top of the stairs. She had a bed, which was more than her father or Peter could say. They occupied pallets on the floor of a long room in

company with half-a-dozen other men, not one of whom removed more than his boots and hat on retiring.

Unable to go to sleep because of her excited condition of mind, she lay awake for a long time after blowing out the candle, staring up into the darkness. And just as she was on the point of losing consciousness, she suddenly became wider awake than ever. All evening long she had searched the crowd with eager eyes, hoping to catch a glimpse of a tall, well-remembered figure. Now, in the dead of night, this horrid thought struck her cold: had he been dismissed from the service for what happened on the King's Highway? Worse than that, was he now languishing in the Tower, degraded and dishonored because he had allowed himself and his men to fall into the trap set for them? Sleep did not come to her for hours.

And then, the next morning, she saw him.

They were returning to the heart of the city after a stroll through the narrow, winding streets adjacent to the Tower of Edelweiss, that grim, forbidding old pile presided over by Dangloss, Minister of Police, when they heard the music of a band in the distance and observed people hurrying toward Regengetz Circus. Presently they found themselves mingling with the crowd at the lower end of Castle Avenue not far from its junction with the Circus,—the name by which the great circular plaza was known. In the opposite direction, a mile away, stood the royal castle, its towers and minarets visible above the tops of the trees in the Park. The broad avenue terminated at the gates in the wall surrounding the castle grounds. Looking down this tree-lined boulevard, Gerane could plainly see the high gates and the four statuesque horsemen who stood before them; their coats made bright little red splotches against the gray wall and their horses were snowy white.

But people were not looking toward the castle; they were

craning their necks in the other direction. The music of the band drew nearer. Police and a number of guardsmen on foot kept the throng to the narrow sidewalks.

Jonifer addressed a policeman. Gerane marveled at his audacity; Peter, with the Tower and its dungeons fresh in his memory, held his breath and involuntarily slid his hand a little farther under his cloak and into the bosom of his shirt where it fingered the butt of a pistol.

"We are strangers here. Pray tell me what is going on."

The policeman smiled. (Gerane was glad to see that smile; Peter removed his fingers from the pistol in order to scratch himself!)

"If you can see out of that eye of yours, gypsy, I would advise you to lift the patch. What you are about to behold is worth the two eyes of any man. Her Serene Highness is returning from a visit to the Summer Palace. The Royal Household takes up residence there next month. And she is so fair to look upon, gypsy, that no man should be satisfied with but half a glance at her."

Jonifer laughed. Then, to Gerane's horror, he proceeded to raise the black patch. Her heart stood still.

"It is a little the worse for wear," said he, "but it is better than no eye at all. Long live the Princess!"

In the act of lowering the patch he turned to his daughter. To her utter amazement, the eye was black and swollen! She was not to learn until afterwards that he had commanded poor Peter to smite him on the eye the night before, berating his own short-sightedness in not being prepared in case the police removed the patch.

"But why don't you do it yourself?" his nephew had protested.

"For the same reason that I would not degrade myself by committing suicide," retorted Jonifer.

A man standing nearby volunteered the information that a

picked company of the Duke's Dragoons was acting as an escort and that the military band from the fortress was leading the procession.

A few minutes later the head of the cavalcade turned into Regengetz Circus. Gerane, standing between the two tall gypsies, was quivering with excitement. They had edged their way through the good-natured crowd and were in the front rank lining the Avenue. In the near distance were people cheering, hats were being lifted and waved. Then horsemen, bearing the royal banners of Graustark, swung slowly out of the Plaza into the head of the Avenue, and behind them strode the band playing a lively march. A file of lancers came next, led by a single officer mounted on a spirited bay. Gerane did not take her eyes from this man until he was near enough for her to determine that he was not the one she longed to see.

Then, suddenly, she beheld Starcourt. He was riding alone a few rods ahead of the royal coach of state. She recognized him the instant he came within range of vision. He sat very erect in the saddle, his eyes straight ahead, his right hand on his hip. For a moment Gerane feared she was about to swoon. She gripped her father's arm for support, causing him to look down at her uneasily. Her eyes were fixed on the approaching horseman. Jonifer perceived a strange, rapt light in them. He heard her murmur under her breath a tremulous, "It is he—there he is."

Utterly bewildered, he followed her gaze. She felt the sudden tightening of his arm.

"As I live and—" he began but checked the muttered exclamation.

Peter too had recognized the young officer. He excitedly but guardedly nudged Gerane with his elbow.

"Do you see that officer—"

"Take off your hat, you lout," interrupted Jonifer quickly. "Have you no manners? The Princess approaches."

As Starcourt passed them his eyes, as if drawn by a magnet, turned toward the crowd on his left. For a moment they rested upon the dark eyes of the slim gypsy girl. She felt herself turn cold with the fear, the certainty that he recognized her. But she need not have been alarmed. His look was merely one of passing admiration. It was not until long afterward that he began to wonder where and when he had seen those deep blue, luculent eyes before. And too late he remembered.

Forgetting the crowd, she leaned forward and stared after him until his broad, straight back in its green coat was cut off from view by the small squad of dragoons following close behind him.

Peter was the first to guess the astonishing truth. A muttered oath fell from his lips. He turned to look at Jonifer. For a few seconds they gazed wonderingly at each other. Then the uncovered eye of the robber chieftain swiftly sought his daughter's partly averted face. He saw the warm tinge of red that flooded her neck and cheek underneath the stain of brown; he saw the quick rise and fall of her bosom. And suddenly he knew what had been ailing Gerane all these months. His jaw sagged in sheer amazement, leaving his mouth open. He looked at Peter. Peter's eyes, fixed on the back of Gerane's head, were bulging in a curious manner. Jonifer forgot where he was.

"So this is how it is, eh?" he exclaimed. "This is what we've been dreaming about and moping and— Now, fry me in hell, if this is not the—"

"Be quiet, there!" broke in the voice of the policeman, turning upon him with a threatening look.

Jonifer purpled, swallowed hard and for a moment saw nothing. He was dazed.

The royal coach was passing. Through the window could be seen, all alone on the back seat, the small figure of the little

princess,—that exquisite child, Yetive. On the seat facing her sat Count Halfont, the Regent, and the Prime Minister. The robber chief recovered himself. He nudged Gerane and bade her look at the future ruler of Graustark. He felt her body relax; then he heard her murmur, "Ah, how lovely she is!"

The little princess smiled directly at Gerane,—there could be no doubt about it! And Gerane's lips parted involuntarily in a timid, wondering smile. For the moment she forgot herself, Starcourt, the whole world,—everything save the little girl who smiled at her from the coach window. People near by turned their heads to stare at her, but she was unconscious of their scrutiny. Then, as her gaze followed the coach, she heard her father's voice. He was speaking to a man who stood beside him.

"I am a stranger here, my friend, and very ignorant. Pray tell me, is that the royal prince?"

He pointed to Starcourt. The citizen gave him a pitying look.

"You must be a stranger indeed, gyspy. We have no royal prince. Her Serene Highness, Princess Yetive, becomes our ruler when she reaches the proper age. Now she is barely ten years old. You mean the man on the bay horse?"

"I do."

"That is Colonel Starcourt, of the Duke's Dragoons."

"Colonel?"

"Formerly Captain Starcourt. He was advanced last Autumn after his encounter with the robbers of Droon Forest."

Gerane was now all ears. Peter blinked.

"Ha!" exclaimed Jonifer, admiringly. "I have heard of those infamous robbers. Did he capture or kill them all?"

The citizen grinned. "He did neither, gypsy. They all escaped with booty valued at twenty thousand gavvos."

"Then why is he so honored?"

"Because he has taken solemn oath to run down and destroy that band of cutthroats."

"Indeed? And will that be an easy task?"

"Baron Dangloss has failed," said the other, laconically. "Still, they say Colonel Starcourt has English blood in his veins."

"What has that to do with it, pray?"

"Have you not heard that the English are bulldogs?"

"Aye, but a bulldog is a poor beast to set after a fox," observed Jonifer, shaking his head. "They have very short noses and very short legs."

"But they never give up," said the citizen.

"Well," said Jonifer, "I wish him luck. I suppose they will knight him and make him a general if he succeeds."

"He is already a knight. On his father's side he is a lord and through his mother's family he is a count. I understand, however, that he would rather earn a title than inherit one."

Gerane could hold her tongue no longer.

"I think that is very fine and noble of him," said she, her eyes glowing.

"True," agreed the citizen before Jonifer could speak. "Still he is a lord and a count no matter what his own whimsey may be."

"Once a lord always a lord," muttered Jonifer, his hand closing tightly on Gerane's arm.

Peter added, rather harshly: "And when he dies they will write Lord Starlight on his tomb instead of—"

"Starcourt," interjected Gerane, softly.

Again Peter and Jonifer exchanged glances.

The next morning they left the city shortly after daybreak, joining a small troop of real gypsies encamped across the river from the West Gate. An hour or two later the whole party was on the road, moving northward in their gaudy

caravans. And now it was Jonifer who was gloomy and preoccupied. Gerane was gay and sprightly. She sat beside Peter who drove the wagon and chatted brightly with him, notwithstanding his brief, surly responses to her comments on the glory of the morning, the beauty of the spring landscape, the welcome freshness of the air after the stuffy night in the lodging-house, and all manner of things that did not in the least interest him. Jonifer, on horseback, was riding a short distance ahead of their van, which was well to the front of the little cavalcade of eight or ten wagons. Abruptly, and out of a clear sky as it were, Peter turned to Gerane and said:

"I may as well tell you, Gerane, that I am going to kill that fellow Starcourt the next time we meet on the Highway."

She uttered a silvery little laugh. He scowled. Then she cried, ironically:

"Do! We will then make a knight of you for ridding the King's Highway of its most dangerous character."

"It is nothing to laugh about," he grumbled.

"Indeed, it isn't," she agreed, affecting penitence. "I laughed because it struck me as funny, that's all. Pray forgive me."

"Funny?"

"Well, wouldn't it be funny if he were to go mooning about the Highway without a gun of his own, especially when he is supposed to be looking for deadly enemies?"

"Nevertheless, I shall kill him," said Peter, baring his teeth in a snarling grin.

"Brave Peter!" she exclaimed, much too airily for him to feel complimented.

He muttered something under his breath and then spat disgustedly over the wheel.

On the second night the three adventurers returned to the valley, having parted company with their gypsy friends near Ganlook, where they took to their horses and rode off into

the depths of the forest. As soon as Jonifer was alone with Matilde, he announced:

"It is all as clear as day to me now. She is in love."

"And why not, Jonifer? She is of an age when girls experience very little difficulty in falling in love. Are you surprised?"

He reached with nervous fingers for the end of his mustache, searched the air vainly for a second or two, and then remembered. He rubbed his chin instead.

"But you would never guess who it is that—"

"The young captain you tied to a tree on her last birthday and left for the wolves to devour."

"Now, by all the—" began Jonifer, astonished. His brow grew black and thunderous. "So she has told you all this, has she? She made a confidante of you instead of coming to me with—"

"Calm yourself, Jonifer. She has told me nothing. I have a woman's eyes. You are the first person she has told, so console yourself."

"But—but, she has not told me," he blurted out. "As a matter of fact, she—ah—so far as I know, she hasn't told anybody."

"Ah, then you may be wrong."

"I am not wrong," he exclaimed. "She is in love and with that—that damned dragoon."

"Then why should you worry? Nothing can come of it. He does not know that she exists. He never will know. So there is the end of it, Jonifer. She will have to content herself—and you too, I've no doubt,—with one of her own kind. I mean one of your excellent young robbers."

Jonifer's eyes bulged. "I would see her dead before anything like that—"

"Worse things could happen to her than being a spinster," broke in Matilde, drily.

"My—my Gerane a spinster? It—why, woman, it would not be natural. The good Lord would never allow such a thing to happen to so beautiful a girl. It is impossible!"

"What do you intend to do about it? That is the question."

Gerane's father seemed for a moment or so to be choking. Then he swore a mighty oath.

"Do about it? *Do* about it? Why, curse me, woman, there is but one thing for me to do about it. If she has set her heart on having this young man for a husband—I—why, burn me in hell!—she shall *have* him,—and that is all there is to be said on the question."

She smiled. "The young man has nothing to say about it, I perceive."

"That remains to be seen," said he, setting his jaw.

"For all you know, he may be married."

"He is not married. I made inquiries. 'Tis true, there is some talk of his being interested in the daughter of a nobleman in Edelweiss, but that is of small consequence, once he has been thrown with Gerane. There is not a man alive who can resist her charms. But that is not what is troubling me. The time has come for my regular pilgrimage to Moscow. I shall be absent for a fortnight or three weeks, which means that nothing can be done in Gerane's case until late in June. I hate delays."

"What is it that you contemplate?"

He eyed her darkly. "You will have an answer to that question in good time, Matilde," was his reply.

Meanwhile Peter was discussing the situation with his mother and brothers, but from an entirely different angle. Their house lay some distance apart from the huddle of cots that, for want of a better name, might be described as a village. It was located on the slope at the head of the valley, sequestered, as it were, because of its ill repute! Jonifer's father, with an inherited sense of propriety, had seen fit to establish his lowly

mistress in a house remote from the homes which he was pleased to regard as respectable and above reproach. Not only was his illegitimate son born in that polluted habitation, but he was compelled to abide therein with his mother up to the time of her death; and it was here that he took his own woodland maid to live in open sin. His three sons were born there. When the eldest, Peter, was about seven years of age he was killed by the soldiers. Since that time the little family of four had continued to make their home in this isolated house, which was presided over by the slatternly, shrewish and at all times malevolent woman known by the name of Ranya Brutz, mother of the sons of Joseph, who himself had been denied a surname by his own father.

"You are as much entitled to call yourself the descendant of a royal duke as is this girl of Jonifer's," she was saying fiercely to Peter who, having recounted his experiences of the past four days, was glowering at his untouched food on the supper table. His younger brothers, eating voraciously, were scowling.

"Have done, mother," blurted out young Matthew.

"We are mongrels," said Joseph, succinctly. "Full many a whelp in the valley can claim relationship with haughty Russian hounds."

"Silence! Speak when you are spoken to,—and, mind you, have a care how you put shame upon your mother. Have I not—"

"Shame? Ha! And who first put shame upon you and—all of us?" sneered Joseph, banging the board with his fist. "The thrice accursed grandson of your royal duke. I am damned sorry to have his dirty blood in my veins."

"It is as good as the blood in Gerane's—" began Ranya Brutz, shrilly.

"Leave Gerane out of this," snarled Peter, looking up.

"Oho! So yelps another mongrel, eh? You were barking

and snapping a while ago, now you are whining. By my soul, you *are* a mongrel cur. You—"

"She is as far above us as the stars above the earth," said Peter. "You cannot drag her down to our level by charging that we have the same grandfather."

For ten minutes Ranya Brutz reviled and excoriated her three sons, who took it all without a murmur, merely glowering as they puffed at their pipes.

"And you, Peter Davos, what kind of a man are—"

"My name is not Davos," interrupted Peter, harshly.

"What kind of a man are you," she went on, "to sit back and let this Jonifer braggart wipe his feet on you? It is high time you showed yourself to be a man. No wonder Gerane looks past you and sees only this sweet-faced officer. Prove to her that you are a man. Show her that you are her master. She will come to heel in no time at all if you—"

Peter laughed outright, but bitterly. "Oh, she would, eh? Little you know about her. There is only one way for me to get Gerane, and that is to take her against her will and break her and—"

"And you cannot do that while Uncle Jonifer is lord and master here," broke in Joseph. "You will have to tear down the house of Davos, just as our common great-great grandsire tried to tear down the house of Ganlook,—and he failed."

"He did not have two strong, healthy brothers to help him," said Peter, meaningly, after a long silence.

"The worm has started to turn," said Ranya Brutz.

CHAPTER VII

STARCOURT IN THE FIELD

GAVAN STARCOURT's avowed determination to run down and destroy the robber band was in a great measure due to injured pride. A very annoying sense of shame, not to say ignominy, lay behind his resolution. Fealty to the Crown and its laws was not the principal object that moved him; he sought for a personal victory over the smiling rascal who had made such a fool of him on that gray September morn.

More than anything else in the world he longed for the day to come when he could stand before that contemptuous leader and remind him of the general who had returned after defeat to overthrow the adversary by whose hand he had been conquered but not disgraced.

He went first to Baron Dangloss, Minister of Police, then to the Minister of War, and finally to the Regent himself, imploring each of them in turn to grant him permission, and with it an armed force, to undertake a campaign against the robbers of Droon Forest.

Dangloss had failed in repeated attempts to trace the band to its mysterious stronghold; he was still employing every means in his power to accomplish the feat. His shrewdest agents so far had found the task an impossible one. So he said to the earnest young captain who once had been tied to a tree by the slippery rogues:

"If I and my assistants are unable to discover the den of these foxes, what chance would you have, Captain Starcourt? They throw us off the scent with the greatest ease,—almost as if they were possessed of supernatural powers,—and we are

supposed to be trained hunters of men. What is it that inspires you with the hope to succeed where we have failed?"

"I have hunted foxes in England, sir," replied Starcourt, with a smile.

"Four-legged ones, yes. A very simple matter, I should say. But this two-legged variety I think you will find a trifle craftier than your obliging little English fox. And besides these foxes carry rifles, which, I humbly submit, gives them the sporting chance that is denied your four-footed friends. Seriously, however, the police and the army so far have failed. They are too clever for us, too adroit. While I am ready and willing to admit that you are cleverer than all of us put together, I trust you will forgive my impudence if I ask whether you consider yourself cleverer than Jonifer Davos."

Starcourt reddened. "I do not consider myself clever at all, Baron Dangloss. On the contrary, I am rather stupid. But there is the old saying, 'A fool for luck.' Please do not infer that it is my desire to interfere in any way with your plans. All I am asking is that I be given a sufficient number of men, together with arms and equipment, to conduct a systematic and perhaps protracted hunt for Davos and his hiding-place.

"How many soldiers would you suggest as being necessary to the success of such an undertaking?" inquired Dangloss, drily.

"Five hundred men," was Starcourt's prompt reply.

The Baron's smile was courteous. While he did not permit himself to betray the fact, the answer had startled him. Not only that but, strange to say, the young man went up considerably in his estimation. Here was a fellow, thought he, who believed in doing things on a large scale, to perdition with the cost.

"Why do you come to me, Captain Starcourt? I have, all told, less than five hundred police and guardsmen in my department."

"I desire, first of all, your approval, your good will and your advice, Baron Dangloss. Without your support and encouragement, I can do nothing."

"Five hundred men," mused Dangloss, twiddling his fingers as he gazed thoughtfully out of the window. Then he looked up into the earnest, resolute eyes of this half-English captain of dragoons. "That means half a regiment of trained soldiers."

"It will be cheaper in the long run," said Starcourt.

"Perhaps. It all depends on whether you catch Jonifer Davos and his band. It would be a very costly matter if it should fail."

"It cannot fail, sir," said the other quietly.

"Tell me just how you purpose going about an enterprise which, I am happy to see, you already assure me will be a success."

Again Starcourt blushed. "These men are somewhere in the hills. I don't mean to say that they are centralized in any given spot,—grouped, as it were. But it is safe to say that they have a meeting place, a general rendezvous. I do not undertake to say that we can catch them all in the net at a single cast, but if we keep after them long enough and without an instant's let-up in the pursuit, we are bound to bring them to earth in the end. It is inevitable. A few here, a few there, —well, you see how it is, Baron. Their spirit is broken. They become more like rats and less like foxes as the chase goes on. And I should keep after them until the last rat is dead, so to speak."

"Including Jonifer Davos?"

"The game will not be worth the candle unless Jonifer Davos is run to earth. I have an engagement with him, as I think I remember telling you, sir."

For half an hour the Minister of Police listened to Starcourt's plans. Then he sent him to the head of the War

Department bearing an official letter in which it was stated that the proposed campaign in no way interfered with the operations of the secret service.

The Duke's Dragoons, by the way, were not a part of the regular standing army. They were the hereditary guardians and defenders of the royal family and its possessions; from their ranks were chosen the Castle guard, the Imperial escort and the somewhat lordly Tower patrol. Authority over this small, select body of men rested with the ruling prince or princess, and not with the general in command of the army. The Minister of War, being a member of the Cabinet and therefore the official mouthpiece of the Crown, had vested in him the power to order and direct the activities of the dragoons; his authority was supreme unless opposed by a decree from the Castle itself.

When Starcourt approached him with the request that at least three hundred soldiers be detached from the regular service and put at his command in the proposed expedition against the brigands, the war lord promptly informed him that the undertaking was not a feasible one. In the first place, he explained, the government could not afford to put a force of such proportions in the field and maintain it for what looked to be an indefinite period. In fact, he sardonically alluded to Starcourt's project as a "wild goose chase."

"Three hundred men from the fortress in addition to the two hundred dragoons you ask me to withdraw from their present duties constitute a force of almost wartime proportions, Captain Starcourt. You acknowledge that it may require many months to accomplish your purpose; has it occurred to you that the army and the police have been striving for over a quarter of a century to break up this band?"

"I trust I may be pardoned, sir, if I presume to call your attention to the fact that the efforts of the army and the police have been rather sporadic in character. There has

never been a sustained, relentless campaign, such as I propose, to rid the mountains of these pests. What if it does take a year, or two years, or even five years? The end is bound to justify the means. Jonifer Davos and his men simply laugh at us as conditions are to-day. They are not afraid of the Army of Graustark nor its police. They take pride in outwitting us. What, sir, have *we* to be proud of?"

It was a bold thing to say. The minister frowned.

"The Army has given a fair account of itself in half a hundred wars, Captain Starcourt," said he stiffly. He did not like this half-English officer who, because of his mother, was a favorite at Court.

Starcourt bowed. "If I were not proud of the Army of Graustark and its record, sir, I should not have considered it an honor to join it," said he. "Nevertheless," he continued, "a comparatively small number of men in Droon Forest continue to make laughingstocks of us. 'All the King's horses and all the King's men' mean about as much to them as they did to Humpty Dumpty."

The other looked a bit puzzled.

"Humpty who?"

"Dumpty," supplied the Captain briefly, and proceeded with his petition. "With five hundred men,—a scant five hundred, sir,—I can guarantee within a reasonable time to rid the country of Jonifer Davos and his band of thieves. They are not ghosts, sir. They are men. Therefore, they can be found and exterminated if a determined, systematic—"

"I am obliged to say to you, Captain Starcourt, that I do not see my way clear to accede to your—ah—I was about to say quixotic request, but I shall refrain from expressing myself so discourteously. We cannot spare the men, the time, nor the money. Moreover, sir, if at any time we decide to send a large force out to cope with these rascals, I shall consider it, for the good of the service, my imperative duty to see to it that

they are commanded by an experienced, seasoned officer. This is not meant as a reflection on you, Captain Starcourt. Nevertheless, I am constrained to remind you that you were in charge of a squad of dragoons that started out to Balak last September and came home without their guns."

Starcourt turned red to the roots of his hair. He was powerless to retort. This man was his superior. He checked the words that rushed to his lips, drew his tall figure up to attention and touched his cap with his fingers. But the color had ebbed from his face, leaving it as white as a sheet when he spoke.

"I am sorry to have troubled you, sir. May I be permitted to retire?"

"Yes. I am very busy. Be kind enough to present my compliments to Baron Dangloss and say to him that I have received the letter he sent to me by you."

"Is that all, sir?" after a short pause.

"It is all I can think of at present," replied the War Minister, curtly.

Starcourt withdrew. His blood was boiling. At the foot of the stairs he came face to face with Baron Dangloss, whose offices were on the ground floor.

"I am requested, Baron Dangloss, to inform you that your letter has been received by the Minister of War," he said, rather thickly.

The little Baron regarded him for a few seconds before remarking, a twinkle in his eye:

"Would you be exceeding instructions if you went so far as to add 'and contents noted'?"

"He read it, sir."

"And was the waste basket handy?"

The young man smiled. This was something like it! His own good humor was restored.

"I beg to report, Your Excellency, that it was."

"Humph!" mused the Baron, a strange glitter succeeding the twinkle in his eye. He took from his pocket a large envelope, bearing the formidable seal and ribbon of his high office. "By the way, here is another epistle I must ask you to deliver in person to Count Halfont, the Regent. See that it is attended to without delay, Captain Starcourt. You are, I believe, on friendly terms with His Excellency?" Now he was smiling again.

"It pleases my vanity to state, sir, that, so far as I know, Count Halfont regards me with some degree of favor."

"In that case, he may be depended upon not to make use of the waste basket while you are present," said the Baron, drily.

Starcourt lost no time in presenting himself at the Castle, where he was received almost immediately by the Regent. Count Halfont was the uncle of the little princess, Yetive. Her mother, recently deceased, was his sister. Since the death of her father, Prince Caspar VI, he had been the Regent of Graustark and would remain in that exalted position until she ascended the Throne at the age of eighteen. He was a man of iron,—but he had a heart of gold. And he was never above smiling good humoredly when he felt like it. Nothing more than that need be said in attesting to his popularity with all classes in the principality.

At the conclusion of their brief talk he announced to Starcourt that he would take the matter under advisement and instructed him to present himself again one week from that day.

The outcome was gratifying to Starcourt and so distasteful to the Minister of War that he forthwith tendered his resignation, which was promptly accepted. It may be said in parenthesis that he pleaded ill health as the prime reason for giving up his portfolio.

Starcourt was allotted his five hundred soldiers and a colo-

nelcy to boot. Two companies of regulars from the citadel and another hundred from the Army post located at the gateway to the Pass of the Two Kings were put at his command, besides a picked force of two hundred from the famous Duke's Dragoons. Active operations were not to be undertaken, however, until the harsh winter months were over.

With the coming of Spring the campaign began in earnest. Camps were established at certain points on the King's Highway and at other places of a supposedly strategic character among the foothills on either side of the Pass. There were eight of these camps in all, each with a company of fifty men. Starcourt's "roving squadron," as it came to be called, dividing into groups of twenty, undertook the stupendous task of combing the hills and valleys for many miles in all directions. Armed with special warrants they seized and examined scores of mountaineers, wood choppers, hunters and charcoal burners, some of whom were held for days as suspects, only to be released in the end for want of positive proof that they were members of Jonifer Davos's band.

Twice Starcourt and his own special squad put up for the night at Digman's Inn, stabling their horses in the yard and barn!

It was when the new colonel was in Edelweiss on his first trip to report progress to Baron Dangloss and the new Minister of War that he saw Gerane Davos in the crowd along Castle Avenue. That is to say, he looked again into a pair of eyes that were strangely familiar to him. It was not until he was on the point of leaving for the hills to rejoin his men that memory suddenly opened its doors and admitted him. He remembered the stripling whose beautiful, blazing eyes had met those of the robber chieftain without wavering! The boy who turned out by Jonifer's confession to be not only a girl but his own daughter!

Cursing himself for a fool, he rushed to Baron Dangloss

with his belated discovery, and inside of an hour the shrewdest operatives in the department were searching for the three gypsies. It is of small moment to announce, almost in passing, that they traced the trio to the lodging house near West Gate and even as far as Ganlook, where all signs of them were lost. The gypsy band, encamped over against the walls of Ganlook, frankly admitted that three strangers with a caravan of their own had joined them outside of Edelweiss and had accompanied them as far as the fork in the roads some distance back, where they had left them and driven off into the hills. The leader of the band declared with considerable violence that he had ordered the three strangers to go their own way. He had no use for them. He was of the opinion that they were not honest! The two men, he said, were surly, arrogant fellows,—the sooner he got rid of them the better. His people were honest, simple folk,—and so on at great length. And he fairly wept when Dangloss's men informed him that the reward of one thousand gavvos might have been his if he had captured and detained Jonifer Davos, the man with the patch over his eye. (They were crocodile tears!)

In the third week of this intensive campaign Starcourt's men stationed at the upper end of the Inn of the Hawk and Raven, not far from the Axphain border swooped down upon a small band of highwaymen in the very act of holding up a stagecoach running between Balak and Ganlook, killing two of them outright and capturing seven others.

News of this astonishing feat reaching Edelweiss hours ahead of the prisoners and their escort, there was a great throng awaiting them when the frightened, far from picturesque looking robbers were brought to the Tower under heavy guard. The city was wild with enthusiasm and excitement. Starcourt's name was on every lip. "Ah, *this* is the way to go about it! Chase them down like rats! No more fiddling around! Put the whole army out there if necessary! The

only way!" Everybody was cheering and calling for Starcourt, the hero of the hour. But he was not there. The crowd murmured gloatingly: "But why expect *him* to be here? He is where he should be! Up there in the mountains attending to the business of ferreting out and destroying all the rest of those rascally thieves of Droon Forest!"

Now the truth must be told. In the first place the highwaymen seized by Starcourt's men were not in any way connected with Jonifer's band. In the second place, one of the six passengers in the stagecoach at the time of the attempted robbery was no other than Jonifer Davos himself! In the third place, it was Jonifer Davos who fired the shots that killed two of the assailants and wounded another, and it was he who, with another valiant but equally respectable looking traveler enroute from Balak to Ganlook, took an active part in the subsequent chase that resulted in the capture of the rest of the gang by Starcourt's men, who surrounded them in an abandoned quarry-shed some miles back from the highway. And Jonifer spoke the truth when he solemnly declared that in all his life he had never before been held up by highwaymen. To his fellow traveler he observed in a sarcastic undertone as they stood off and watched the soldiers disarm and bind up the quaking, slavering bandits:

"Axphainian goslings masquerading as eagles! Humph!" He spat disgustedly. "And these soldiers believe they have captured some of our—I mean, some of Jonifer Davos's men."

"Ho! What a joke!" sneered the other.

"Joke?" growled Jonifer, glaring at his companion. "It is the most damnable insult! These miserable, whining—why, curse me, I could weep for shame."

Later on Jahn Crispo's statement was confirmed. The officer in command of the troopers announced to Jonifer, who sat beside the driver of the stagecoach as it continued its interrupted journey down the King's Highway, that this was

the entering wedge. From now on the job would be comparatively easy. These sniveling, cowardly wretches would be only too glad to betray their comrades in return for some form of immunity on the part of the crown, and "before you know it, we will have Jonifer Davos and every last one of his cutthroats in the Tower, waiting to have their heads chopped off."

Jonifer could not resist saying: "Well, if these fellows are a sample of the stuff that Jonifer Davos's men are made of, I must say I cannot understand how he has been able to rule the King's Highway for so many years, sergeant."

The sergeant spoke with commendable disdain: "Simply because the right sort of men have not been sent out to capture him, sir."

"Oh, I see," said Jonifer Davos, quite politely.

"To be sure," admitted the sergeant, quite as politely, "it is more than likely we shouldn't have captured these fellows at all except for your courage and—"

"Oh, that was nothing," broke in the robber chief, with a deprecatory gesture. "I was foolhardy, of course, in resisting as I did,—but, you see I carry quite a large sum of money about me and I am blessed if I could bear the thought of letting it fall into the hands of thieves. That is to say, you understand, without a fight."

"Still it was an uncommonly brave thing you did, sir," said the officer, gazing with admiration and not a little wonder at the calm, far from bellicose-looking gentleman on the box. (Jonifer Davos was as tidy and as inoffensive looking a traveler as you would see in many a day. And so was Jahn Crispo, for that matter.)

"Colonel Starcourt will welcome you with open arms, Mr. Schmidt. I forgot to mention that he is in charge of our operations, sir."

"I have heard of him," said Jonifer. "The last time I was in Edelweiss I heard it said that he was making plans to—ah—

hunt down a band of robbers. I should like to meet him. But, you see, I am going no farther than Ganlook. I shall not visit Edelweiss on this trip. Pray give your commanding officer my compliments and say I hope to see him very soon. If he should happen—"

"He is not in Edelweiss, sir. His headquarters are at Ganlook Fort, not twenty leagues from here. You know the Fort, I dare say?"

"Oh, yes, I have passed by it a number of times," said the other after a moment, his eyes narrowing a little as he gazed straight ahead. Headquarters at Ganlook Fort?

"But he is constantly on the move, riding from camp to camp and on side expeditions off into the mountain roads, so we may fall in with him at any one of the posts between here and the foot of the Pass."

This time Jonifer's eyelids flickered ever so slightly.

"I hope so," he said, with a grand flourish. By no means, however, was he sincere.

"In about two hours we come to Camp No. 7," said the sergeant. "The one we just left, where I and my men are stationed, is No. 8, the last before we come to the frontier. There are five camps along the Highway between ours and Fort Ganlook. We work out from these, you see, into the hills and—"

"Five camps?" broke in Jonifer, much more sharply than he intended.

"There are eight all told. Fifty men to each camp."

"Eight times fifty," mused the other, and his frown was meant to be one of simple calculation. "Four hundred in all, eh?"

"Five hundred, including Colonel Starcourt's roving detail. The pick of the army, if I may be permitted to say so without boasting, sir. We are to remain in the field for a year if necessary."

Jonifer was alarmed. This was most disturbing news.

Something he had not counted on at all. He had attached little or no importance to the words of his informant that day in Edelweiss. Not once but many times before the hills had been raked and threshed by soldiers and police, so he had dismissed the report of fresh activities with scarcely a thought. But now, for the first time in his life, he was aware of a curious sensation of dread, as one who is walking straight toward an unseen trap that he knows lies somewhere along the path he has to traverse. He looked about him and swore under his breath. He was hemmed in by heavily armed soldiers,—thirty of them, he figured. The acute feeling of dread passed after a moment or two, however; he shrugged his shoulders and sighed. He was a fatalist. Let come what may. If it were destined that he should put his foot into the trap,—well, he knew there was only one way out of it for him. If the worst came to pass, he could shoot his way out, so why worry? By that he meant he could shoot himself. He knew he could never be taken alive. Besides, he had been in tight places before,—and had got out of them.

And presently this astonishing rascal began to laugh softly to himself. His black eyes sparkled. This was a beautiful adventure! He even began to hope that he would meet Starcourt, shake hands with him and listen to his congratulations and praise!

Some time in the future, if his designs in regard to the young officer were carried to a successful conclusion, he would find a great deal of pleasure and amusement in reminding that vainglorious gentleman of the meeting.

But after they had passed through Camp No. 7 and were on the way to the even larger one at "Night's Rest," his confident mien deserted him. He began to realize that this was no child's game the soldiers were playing. In this camp he saw and recognized the half-dozen mountaineers who were being questioned by the officers in charge. And he knew that these sullen confederates recognized him and were nonplussed.

He contrived to set their minds at rest,—and a good thing he was able to do so, he reflected, for he discovered that they were darkly wondering whether he had gone over to the enemy and was betraying them!

As he rode away with the little troop, he was conscious of a very uncomfortable feeling that there might be one among these mountain men who would blurt out the truth about him, and then what chance would he and Crispo stand? For miles his ears were alert for sounds of galloping horses coming up from behind!

He and Jahn Crispo made their escape that night. A thunderstorm came up about eleven o'clock, a wild, vicious mountain hurricane. He and Jahn had been assigned quarters all to themselves, a couple of officers gladly surrendering their tent to the guest of honor and his friend. As they stole away into the forest and circled back to the highway below the camp and its fourscore unsuspecting soldiers, Jonifer chuckled with frequency and glee. It was raining pitchforks, the wind was roaring, thunder boomed like a mighty cannonade, but the two excellent merchants minded not. Indeed, they not only thanked their lucky stars,—which fortunately were invisible!—for such a manifestation of kindness on the part of nature, but they reveled in the hellish turmoil. When they were safely across the charging stream at the bottom of the gorge,—it was no wetter than the torrent from the skies above,—and were making their way up into the hills, Jonifer, very short of breath, paused to explain his chuckles.

"I cannot help laughing, Jahn, when I think that this is the second time we have tricked Starcourt on that very identical spot. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Curse me!" growled Crispo, "if it wasn't for all this thunder they could hear that laugh of yours back yonder in the camp."

Shortly after nightfall the next evening they rode into Digmans' stable yard on a couple of sorry horses borrowed from a

wood chopper, in whose cabin they had spent part of the preceding night and most of the following day. They were safely back at their homes in the valley an hour or two later, counting the gold they had carried back from Moscow.

Gerane's joy over her father's safe return was unbounded. He had been gone the better part of a month. Great uneasiness had prevailed in the valley. Disquieting news had reached the inhabitants through the Digmans, who, in their agitation, reported that the whole Graustark army was engaged in a stupendous effort to put an end to the robbers, once and for all.

As time went on and the two messengers to Moscow were long overdue, Gerane proposed that a rescue party go forth in search of them and to give battle if necessary. She announced her firm intention to head the band, whether or no, and flew into tempestuous rages when her propositions were frowned upon or, which was worse, laughed at by the men of the valley. She was in a great state of despair, indignation and even fury when Jonifer finally came home. He was very proud of her, but swore by the high heavens that if he had caught her out in the Forest looking for him he would have chopped her head off and sent it to Colonel Starcourt as a warning of what he might expect if he continued to annoy the young lady's father, Jonifer Davos!

She had stayed awake far into many a night, mentally cataloguing the frightful things she would do to Starcourt if he harmed her father. She would make him pay! First, she would cut out his tongue, then slice off his ears; after which she would burn his eyes out with a red-hot poker,—no, she would not do that until after he had had the use of them during a process of dismemberment that was to be part of his punishment. What a bloody picture she drew! She who abhorred cruelty of any sort, who actually shrank from the sight of blood!

And now she was happier than she had ever been in all her

life. Her father was at home, safe and sound. She would not have to do all those horrible things to Starcourt. Still she was not above wishing that she might capture him alive.

She had become unpleasantly aware of a change in her cousin Peter. As the days went by and the impression grew that Jonifer may have fallen into the clutches of the law, Peter revealed unmistakable signs of what she was pleased to describe as bumptiousness. He became increasingly officious. His manner toward her indicated a quality of familiarity that had not been manifested before. He strutted a little; he took it upon himself to give orders,—wildly and uncertainly to be sure, but orders, just the same. And his two brothers seemed to be holding their heads higher than was their wont. They too strutted a little. Slowly it dawned upon her, —and to others as well,—that Peter and his brothers secretly were hoping that Jonifer would never return. The first named began to make a practice of visiting the chieftain's house and lolling about as if he were quite at home there. And at such times she did not like the way he looked at her. Moreover, his mother, Ranya Brutz, the "bad woman," was going about the place with her head high and a domineering light in her handsome black eyes.

Gerane went to Julius Broadaxe with her suspicions. That worthy, laying down his sledge hammer, calmly answered that he would like nothing better than to wring Peter's neck and would do so within the hour if she—

"No, no, Julius, you must not do that," she cried. "I may be wrong. I may be silly and—"

"We have all noticed the change in him," broke in the smith grimly. "We do not like the airs he is putting on. Besides, a few of the younger men seem to be getting mighty thick with him lately. It does not look right to me. Peter is a fellow I have always liked. Most every one likes him. But if he thinks he can step into your father's boots, Gerane, and deprive you of the right to succeed to the leadership of this—"

"Good heavens, Julius," she cried out; "I do not want to become the leader of this band of—of you all, I mean. And don't you dare to even intimate that my father has been—well, that he will not come back alive." She clenched her hands. "I—I could kill you, Julius Snook, for suggesting such a thing. I could tear you limb from limb. Don't you—"

"With those little scratchers of yours?" grinned Julius, looking down in huge amusement at her fists. His great hands were on his hips, his prodigious arms akimbo. "Bless your heart, I would die laughing if you tried it."

"Be serious, if you please, Julius," she commanded. "And give heed to what I am saying. Let me see, what was I saying? Oh, yes, about Peter."

And they discussed the new Peter for half an hour, coming to but one conclusion, and that was Julius's: Peter's neck would have to be wrung. Likewise the necks of his two brothers. Julius gallantly refused to wring a woman's neck, so Ranya was to be spared.

Jonifer's return put an end to Peter's increasing lordliness. He slipped back into his old groove, that of absolute fidelity to his leader. There is this to be said for Peter and his brothers: they were loyal to their chieftain. Their mother's scathing taunts had no effect whatsoever upon them. So long as Jonifer Davos was alive they would stand beside him and fight unto the death for him. Was he not their father's brother?

Many days passed before Jonifer, guessing Gerane's secret and inwardly applauding the forbearance she showed in asking no questions, brought up the subject of Starcourt and his activities. He saw her eyes brighten; her cheeks grew warm; her lips were parted as she listened to him.

"Curse me," said he later on to Julius Broadaxe; "I am of half a mind to undertake it this very week."

"It would be folly, Jonifer. They are too strong for us. It behooves us to keep our noses inside this valley, my friend."

"But, man, it makes me unhappy to see her going about with

her eyes sad and—why, it is pathetic, Julius. If you had a daughter whose eyes used to be bright and gay and you had to see them getting heavier and sadder all the—"

"Now, see here, Jonifer, enough of this. What do you think I am made of? You will have me crying if you keep this thing up any longer. Besides, we all agreed in counsel the other night that it was best to wait till this flurry is over and the troops go back to where they belong."

"I suppose you are right," sighed Jonifer.

Nevertheless, after standing it as long as he could, he sallied forth one night with a goodly company of men, bent on carrying out the design that had been on his mind for months. He had learned from one of the Digmans that Starcourt and a small detachment of troopers were to camp for the night in one of the glens upon the hills above Semlik. The story of his attack and its result calls for but few words. Suffice it to say that when he and his yelling band of whirlwind riders dashed into the glen, expecting to take Starcourt by surprise, they were met by a fusillade of rifle shots that laid half a dozen of the assailants low and sent the others scurrying for their lives! Of the twenty men who rode out with Jonifer only eleven returned to the valley and they were hard put to gain this place of refuge.

And for a long time thereafter the great Jonifer glowered and cursed the livelong day. He took no comfort, you may be sure, in Broadaxe's grisly contention that this was "the best way to keep our population down."

But what irked him even more than personal defeat was the incomprehensible joy of his daughter over the fact that neither he nor Starcourt had been killed!

He fairly gnashed his teeth when Gerane had the consummate impudence to beg him not to match swords or wits again with so redoubtable a warrior as Colonel Starcourt!

So he went up into the woods and made a solemn vow

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAND OF JONIFER

STARCOURT was rapidly becoming a popular idol in Edelweiss. At Castle, Tower and Fortress he was called upon to relate over and over again the story of his "most pleasant" repulse of Jonifer Davos himself. He was never without an eager audience that harkened with glistening eyes and happy smiles to these recitals, albeit he did his utmost to avoid giving them except to his superior officers. No one, however, seemed to care a smithereen about hearing them except from the hero himself.

One of his most eager and enthusiastic questioners was the Countess Jabassy, at whose house in Prince Rudovic Street he lunched on the occasion of his first visit to the city after the widely heralded exploit. She was vastly interested and, he thought, rather effusive in her praise.

"But, oh, Gavan," she exclaimed at one time, "what a pity it was that you did not capture the leader with the others."

"We did not capture any of them," he reminded her. "Those who fell into our hands were as dead as herrings, you know. Several of the wounded succeeded in getting away with—"

"Did you say they were all dead? But surely there must have been seriously wounded men who were unable to escape in the rout that followed."

"There were three or four desperately wounded men, Countess," he replied slowly; "but they were too brave to allow themselves to be captured alive. They shot themselves before our eyes. We had nine dead men on our hands, all

masked, and not a single live one to bear witness against his neighbors,—if you see what I mean."

She leaned back in her chair with what he and the other guests took to be a sigh of disappointment. Count Jabassy's hand shook as he lifted the wine glass to his lips; the strange gleam in his eyes was concealed by the lowering of his lids as if in exquisite enjoyment of the wine he was sipping.

"Well, we must give the bloody rascals credit for being brave," said one of the men.

"Or cowardly," said Count Jabassy, raising his lids and affecting a sneer.

"And you really saw this brigand Davos?" cried the Countess, vivaciously. "What is he like, Gavan? Is he so terrible?"

Starcourt smiled ruefully. "He hasn't changed much since I saw him last fall, Countess," he said. "I thought he was rather terrible then. I had a shot at him the other night and missed. So we were even. He did the same by me last fall."

"It would have been a great feather in your cap if you had brought him down," murmured the Countess.

"He bears a charmed life. A dozen of my men shot at him. He rode off waving his hat,—untouched, I believe. And, by the way, he already had a feather in his hat."

"Of course, you pursued the rascals at once," was the observation of a timid little gentleman.

Starcourt eyed him coldly. "You should not forget, sir, that they were already mounted. They had a long start before we could saddle and mount our horses. Nevertheless," he concluded sarcastically, "we pursued them. Precious little good it did us. They had vanished like ghosts."

"Dear me, how uncanny," cried one of the ladies.

"You had three of your own men killed, I believe," said Jabassy, after drinking again.

"And several wounded," added Starcourt. "We cannot all hope to bear charmed lives, I am sorry to say."

"Better luck next time," said the Countess.

Count Jabassy coughed. "Ahem! Ah—er—have you any idea where their hiding place is, Starcourt?" He was leaning forward, his gaze fixed intently on the young officer. Only his wife noticed the slight tremor in his voice. She frowned.

"Do not ask stupid questions, Emlen," she chided quickly. "You don't suppose Colonel Starcourt would tell any one if he—"

"I don't mind confessing that we haven't the faintest idea at present where their hiding place is located," interrupted the colonel, frankly.

"It must be in heaven," remarked the timid little man, facetiously.

"More likely to be the other place," scoffed Jabassy, loudly.

Days went by. Starcourt's men not only kept up their ceaseless, dogged search of the hills and forest, but also the unremitting seizure and examination of the dwellers therein and the vagabonds who roved the roads and plains. But never a sight had they of the real vandals, nor were they any nearer to solving the mystery surrounding their hiding place. That they had succeeded in driving the robbers into their secret lair from which they were afraid to emerge was proved by the fact that not a single attack had been made upon coach or traveler in the Inn of the Hawk and Raven since the so-called blockade began. Troopers ranged the forest from the lowlands of Graustark to the borders of Axphain, covering a vast area from east to west, and even going far down toward the distant mountains in the south.

And all this time, Gavan Starcourt was looking for a pair of deep, blue eyes. Every woman or girl he encountered, in city or forest, underwent a quick, searching scrutiny on his part. He would know those eyes if he ever saw them again.

They haunted him. Nor would he ever forget the dark, brilliant face of the gypsy girl he had seen in the crowd on Castle Avenue. At the time, he had been struck by her beauty, but more than anything else he remembered the big blue eyes that gazed up at him from a brown, gypsy face, singularly out of place in such a setting.

He had climbed the mountains to timber line only to be turned back by the unscalable peaks and crags that baffled all human endeavor. He was tired, worn out physically by the end of the summer, and was beginning to lose hope of success. In a short time winter would set in, and unless he accomplished his aim within the next few weeks the grim quest would have to be abandoned for that year at least. He knew that somewhere in these lofty hills, somewhere in the depths of the great forest, Jonifer Davos and his band were hiding like animals driven to cover. And the chieftain's daughter, the girl with the blue eyes, the stripling who so dauntlessly had confronted his conqueror that day in the Pass,—she too was hiding with the rest of them. Knowing the custom of the robbers, he found himself wondering whether she would ever allow herself to be taken alive.

He shrank from the thought of this wild, lovely girl shooting herself rather than fall into his hands.

The second week in September was hot, even in the shades of the great forest cathedral where nature worshiped in whispers. The soldiers stationed along the highway increased the frequency of their rather hazardous visits to the now sluggish stream at the bottom of the gorge, where they disported themselves in the cool waters. Here and there were to be found quiet pools of considerable depth, approached with some difficulty because of the steep, jagged banks of the stream, contrasting sharply with the widely separated, swift-flowing "shallows," where it was possible, at certain seasons only, to cross to the opposite side by fording.

One evening shortly after dusk, Starcourt and two compan-

ions made their way down to the stream from a temporary camp pitched on the wooded slope not far from the glen known as "Night's Rest," but on the opposite side of the gorge.

Divesting themselves of their clothing, they slipped down into the shadowy black pool. Starcourt, being far the best swimmer, boldly, as was his habit, made his way with easy strokes to the lower end of the stretch, while his less expert friends contented themselves with timorous ventures and noisy splashings within easy reach of the bank. The pool was several hundred yards long, ending in a swift current where its waters rippled over stony obstacles and surged down to a lower level. Starcourt's camp was nearly half a mile away. The men, a dozen in all, fatigued by a trying day in the hills, were asleep except for the two sentinels who stood watch.

For the better part of the afternoon these soldiers had been trailed by a stealthy group of horsemen who, remaining far behind and more or less under cover, had come to a halt a mile or so below the camp without being observed. Even as Starcourt and his companions were picking their way down to the pool in the semi-darkness, a full score of silent men on foot were stealing cautiously through the trees toward the little camp when their progress was checked by scouts who came back with the word that three of the soldiers, one of whom unmistakably was Colonel Starcourt, had left the camp and were walking down to the river.

Whereupon all of Jonifer Davos's plans were changed with an astonishing suddenness. His original intention was to fall upon the helpless troopers, slay them all—save one!—and depart triumphant. He did not relish the idea of killing men from ambush, for he was not a cowardly man, but it seemed to be the only way to carry out his purpose,—which was to capture young Starcourt alive and, if possible, unharmed.

The news elated him. He rejoiced. The feat now might be accomplished without killing any one at all. A couple of

well-timed blows on the head would put Starcourt's companions out of commission for the time being and the rest would be easy. It was with this purpose in mind that he led his men stealthily down to the edge of the stream.

And now, for the second time, his plans were altered. If it were possible to seize Starcourt without alarming the two men at the upper end of the pool and make off with him—"Why, bless us all," he whispered excitedly, "his men will go on believing to their dying day that their leader was drowned, and for days they will be dragging the river for his body!"

And that is precisely what happened!

A strong, half-naked robber slipped into the water fifty or sixty feet back of Starcourt and swam boldly after him. The latter, on the point of beginning his return to the upper end of the pool, saw what he believed to be one of his friends in the stream behind him. As he swam toward him the fellow began to gasp and gurgle, acting as if exhausted and in danger of drowning.

"Keep cool," warned Starcourt, close by. "Put your hand on my shoulder and—"

He never completed the sentence. A long arm shot up from the water and, for a second, was poised above the head of the would-be rescuer. Then it came swiftly down. There was a stout bludgeon gripped in the hand that fell. Starcourt's groan was cut short as his head sank beneath the surface of the pool.

And for days thereafter scores of soldiers hunted for the body of Gavan Starcourt and not for the robbers of Droon Forest. Edelweiss, shocked and grieved, offered up prayers for the soul of the gallant young officer who had lost his life in the treacherous mountain stream, and his mother, Lady Starcourt, went into the deepest mourning and was not to be consoled.

The dripping figure of Jonifer Davos, supporting an un-

conscious burden, struggled up the bank after being dragged from the water by eager hands. Off into the dark forest scurried the silent, shadowy band, elated by the success of this bloodless coup. Starcourt's long, naked body was slung over the mighty shoulders of the robber chieftain. Not a word was spoken until they were some distance from the river. There the tired Jonifer halted and lowered his burden to the ground.

"Your sash, Julius," he panted. "We must cover his head. He will be coming to his senses before long. Any blood? Good! It was a well-placed blow. I hated to do it. He was aiming to save my life. Heigh-ho! I wonder what he would have done if he had known who I was. Strangled me, I've no doubt,—or tried to, at least. And then I should have had to kill him. He is a lucky dog. Do not tell me there is no such thing as luck! And consider all that Dame Fortune still has in store for him! Come! Up with him, you two. We have no time to spare."

Starcourt was not long in regaining consciousness. His sensations are easier imagined than described. . . . Suffice it to say, his hands and feet were bound, a thick cloth covered his mouth, leaving his nostrils free, and he was being borne through the darkness by means of a conveyance that completely baffled all conjecture. He could only realize that he was powerless to do more than wriggle his body, which, added to the jerking, undulating motion, caused him to experience the nausea peculiar to sea-sickness.

A long time elapsed before his brain cleared sufficiently to admit of even the slightest notion as to what had happened to him and, which is more to the point, what was happening to him now. He was aware of being lifted high and deposited gently across the saddle of a horse, his feet hanging on one side, his head on the other. Some one mounted the animal back of the saddle—and again he was conscious of moving

swiftly through the air. Now he could hear the thud of many hoofs on the soft turf. He was strangely cold. . . .

Long afterward he heard a voice issuing a command to halt. By this time he knew precisely what had transpired. He was a prisoner in the hands of the robbers of Droon Forest!

His head was paining him terribly. He felt he was smothering. Then, at last, strong hands lifted him from the saddle and deposited him on the ground. His legs gave way at once and he would have fallen but for the support of those who held him up. There was no sign of light, but even in the inky blackness he was able to make out the figures of men and horses. Then a voice he remembered well spoke:

"Unbind his legs. We must get some clothing for him. Here, you, Peter, take off your coat. Jahn, your breeches. Your boots, Gorgas." A moment later the speaker was addressing Starcourt. "You are in no danger, Colonel Starcourt. Possess your soul in peace. No harm can possibly come to you, so do not be alarmed. You have been looking for Jonifer Davos for several months. It is my pleasure to inform you that you have found him at last."

Starcourt struggled at his bonds; strange, inarticulate sounds came from his lips. Jonifer went on:

"Control yourself! What sense is there in struggling? You but waste your strength. There are twenty of us. Come, man, take things as you find them. Now, if you will but give me your ear for a moment or two while these good fellows cover your nakedness with their— Alas, you must not expect a perfect fit, my friend. I fear me you will not know yourself by daylight, but do not blame your tailor. Ah, now, that is better. You are worrying over the fate of your men. Console yourself, sir. Not so much as a hair of their heads has been touched. They are as safe—well, as safe as you are at this moment."

And with this, Jonifer Davos proceeded to give him a terse but at the same time boastful account of his seizure. In concluding he said:

"The more I think of it, the better pleased I am with my strategy. You will be missed, but they will believe you were drowned. If we had attacked and killed your party, the whole blessed army of twenty thousand men would be after us. As it is, no one suspects us, and—well, you see for yourself, Colonel Starcourt, how fortune smiles on all of us. You are safe, your soldiers are alive, and Jonifer Davos is perhaps safer than he has been in years. Your untimely death will surely put an end to this very annoying interference with our business. The soldiers will decamp. The Highway will be what it used to be. We will thrive once more. And you, my dear Colonel, may yet find that life is sweet. So do not hang your head, my friend. Was it not an Englishman who wrote a play called 'All's well that ends well'? Ah! Are we ready to be on the move? Assist the Colonel into the saddle, men, and secure his legs with a rope under the horse's belly."

For hours the party rode through the black forest, up hill and down, slowly at times and briskly at others, and never once did poor Starcourt lift his head. His shoulders drooped. At times he cried like a child, the tears running down his cold, stiff cheeks. Choking sobs broke from his lips. And Jonifer Davos did not laugh at him. He was sorry for him. He knew why this strong, gallant soldier was crying.

At last they halted. Starcourt, faint with pain and the shame that was breaking his heart, submitted without a murmur when a bandage was tied tightly about his eyes. This act of precaution alone told him that daylight was near. Then, after a long interval, they were on the move again, descending a steep hill. Ten or fifteen minutes later they crossed over a bridge. Starcourt did not know it, but it was the floor of Digmans' stable and at once were in a cold, damp gorge (the

cavern), through which the horses clattered as if they were on a cobblestone pavement.

Starcourt now began to take notice of a decided change in the conduct of his unseen companions. They no longer spoke in low undertones. Instead they appeared to have cast off all reserve, all caution. They began talking loudly. Many of them were cursing. He could not understand why they were in such an evil mood. What more could they ask?

It dawned upon him suddenly that he had at last penetrated to the long-sought sanctuary of Jonifer Davos and his robbers. He groaned. What next?

At a sharp command from some one up ahead, the noisy chatter died down to a subdued growling, and then there was silence except for the thud of hoofs on turf. After what must have been half an hour's time, his horse was brought to a stop, his feet untied and he was lifted from the saddle. He could hardly stand. While two men held him up by the arms, another removed the sash that had served so long as a sort of gag. But the blindfold was not disturbed.

"You are free to yell and curse as loudly as you please," were the mocking words that fell from the leader's lips.

"Take this beastly thing off my eyes," stuttered the prisoner, speaking with great difficulty. His lips were thick and stiff. "Let me look upon your dastardly—"

"All in good time," interrupted the other, placatively. "Be patient. You have been wanting to see our domain for a long time, Colonel Starcourt, and your curiosity is soon to be satisfied. But not at present. Now, will you condescend to walk with me for a short distance without making a fool of yourself, or will it be necessary for us to truss you up again and carry you?"

Again Starcourt's chin sank until it almost touched his breast.

"Do what you will with me," he muttered hoarsely. "I

am in your power. But if you have a grain of humanity in your rotten soul, give me water to drink."

"A hundred paces from here you will find water and wine and food."

"Food!" fairly snarled the dragoon. "Do you think I can ever eat again?"

"Aye, that I do," remarked his captor, with a confident laugh. "And drink, too, for that matter. We have a rare Tokay that came from the cellars of a Grand Duke in Russia—"

"Oh, close your trap!" grated Starcourt, inelegantly but forcibly.

"Trap?" queried Jonifer, and fell to thinking perplexedly as he took the prisoner's arm. "Curse me, you need not waste advice on me, sir. You will find the trap most securely closed. Come! Will you walk, or would you prefer being dragged by the heels?"

"I'll walk, curse you," said Starcourt, steadying his knees.

After walking for a short distance they came to a house which they entered after Jonifer had warned his captive to "lift your feet." The door closed behind them. A moment later the stout rope that bound his arms to his sides was untied and the bandage removed from his eyes.

"You are free, Colonel Starcourt," spoke the voice of Jonifer. "Consider yourself a welcome guest in our midst."

Starcourt, blinking, gazed about him. His arms were so numb he could not lift them. The weak, pale light of dawn, coming through the small window at his right, revealed the figures of three men. The tallest of these, doffing his hat, bowed low.

"We have met before, but I fear my face is unfamiliar to you. I am Jonifer Davos. This gentleman is Julius Snook and here is my excellent nephew Peter. And this"—with a

spacious wave of his hand—"is your home. Make yourself comfortable, sir."

The captive was now in full possession of his wits. He looked hard at each of the three men in turn. The tall, dark leader was smiling, his white, even teeth showing below his fierce mustache, his black eyes sparkling. Julius Snook, broad of shoulder and bearded, took that moment to yawn prodigiously. The gusty sound accompanying this mighty relaxation was appalling. Peter, young and beardless, was scowling. He was coatless.

Starcourt suddenly shrugged his shoulders and turned his head to inspect the room.

"You promised me water," he said over his shoulder.

"Peter! Two pails of it at once, hot and cold, and a gourd. This house," he went on, turning to Starcourt, "—or if you prefer, this villa or even château, belongs to me. My own humble dwelling is but a short distance from here, beyond the hill you may see by looking out of this window. I am sorry to say that there is but one room in this palatial abode. I rarely sleep here. My daughter objects to having her sleep disturbed when I happen to be out till all hours of the morning, attending to business. But I can assure you that the couch is most comfortable. And how do you like the furnishings? My daughter spent days decorating the room and—"

"I remember your daughter," interrupted the other, with a sneer. "A slender lad in brown breeches, if my memory serves me right."

To his surprise, Jonifer was not offended. On the contrary, he beamed. "Will you ever forget how she stood up to me and ordered me to set you free? And to this day she wonders whether I finally obeyed her and sent a couple of men back to release you long before the stagecoach was due. I wish you would tell her when you have the chance that I did

that very thing. I fear she has always doubted my word about—"

"So those fellows were not honest wood choppers, eh?"

"Well," said Jonifer, squinting one eye, "they chop wood as honestly as any two men I know of when it is needed. Hullo! Does your head pain you? Let me see. Sit down on this bench, Colonel. Now, do not behave like a child! I am not going to hurt you."

Starcourt sat down on the bench and leaned back against the wall, his hand feeling tenderly of the large bump above his temple. Jonifer ran his fingers over the injured spot, pressed gently, and clucked sympathetically.

"Quite a knob. I will send for our apothecary, Professor Gratz—a most excellent man. He will rub it with a liniment and before you know it, the swelling will be—"

"He has a liniment," broke in big Broadaxe, bending over to examine the bump, "that works just as well on men as it does on horses. And as for fevers and broken legs and amputations and the stitching up of—"

Peter came in at that juncture, bearing two pails of water, one of them steaming.

"Jahn Crispo is waiting outside," he announced. "He says he cannot go home without his breeches. And Gorgas would like his boots, too, Uncle Jonifer."

He eyed Starcourt balefully, as the latter moistened his dry lips and drank greedily of the cold water.

"In that case," said the chieftain, pursing his lips and shaking his head, "you will have to get into bed, Colonel, and wait until I return with some clothing of my own,—to which you are more than welcome. We are pretty near of a size. Now, here is cold and hot water. Drink your fill. Lave your face and body, and then get into bed. You will feel better. In half an hour I will return with a hot breakfast for you,—or did you tell me that you never intend to eat again?"

"I will eat," said Starcourt, resignedly. He stood up and looked out of the window. "Is day just breaking?"

"The sun is hardly up. In case you have lost track of time, this happens to be the eleventh of September."

"A most important day with us," explained Broadaxe, from the doorway.

"Thanks," said Starcourt, drily. "I will never forget the eleventh of September."

"Just toss all these garments out of the window as soon as you have stripped," ordered Jonifer. "Wait outside for them, Peter, and see that they get to their owners. We will leave you now, Colonel Starcourt. Remember that you are free as air. You are at liberty to come and go as you please. It is only fair, however, to inform you that you cannot possibly escape from this valley. You will waste your time if you try to do so and you will meet with nothing but disappointment. If I were in doubt about it I would not leave you unguarded for a moment."

The captive faced him. "You are a very civil fellow, Jonifer Davos. It is too bad that you are a robber. You could quite easily be a gentleman, I am bound to say."

Jonifer scowled. "If you were not a gentleman, Colonel Starcourt, I would take that as an insult and shoot you on the spot."

"I begged you to shoot me not so many months ago. I wish to God you had."

"I may still have that pleasure, sir."

"How long do you purpose holding me a prisoner?"

"That depends entirely upon the way the wind blows," returned Gerane's father.

"I do not understand you. That is no answer."

"It is all I choose to give at present," said Jonifer, curtly.

He went out, closing the door behind him. Peter and Broadaxe had preceded him. Starcourt listened for the turn

of a key, but there was no such sound. Nothing could have been more convincing than this. He knew that Davos had spoken the truth when he said there was no chance of escape from the grith into which he had been so ignominiously delivered.

"They've got me," he muttered, setting his jaw. "No use kicking against the pricks. I am in for it." He sat down heavily, dejectedly on the bench below the window casement, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands. Several minutes passed before he lifted his head suddenly, a gleam of inspiration in his eyes. "That daughter of his! By gad, I'd forgotten about her. She took my part that morning on the—"

A harsh voice interrupted him. Peter was speaking to him through the window.

"Hi! Are you going to be all day about it? If you do not pass them out here in two minutes we'll come in and take them off of you,—and we'll not be ladylike, either."

This appealed to Starcourt's sense of humor. He even grinned as he began to divest himself of the ill-fitting garments. "Ladylike!"

Peter, his elbows on the sill, watched the proceedings. He scowled enviously. This fellow's long, white body made him think of pictures he had seen in books belonging to Heber Dykas, the scholar, who had a surpassing knowledge of Greek history and mythology and could relate wondrous stories of gods and goddesses, calling them all by name. There was one picture in particular,—he could not think of the god's name, but Starcourt was like him. Peter's envy was tempered by admiration.

"Thanks," said the captive, passing the garments through the window. "I'll do as much for you some time."

Peter blinked. This fellow was beyond all understanding. He mumbled something in reply and went away.

Ten minutes later Starcourt was in bed, ruefully concluding that it was the only place he could be with decency and comfort. He allowed his gaze to roam about the small, low-ceiled room. The roughly plastered walls were bare save for a sadly cracked oil painting which hung on the wall opposite him. It was the portrait of a good-looking young man wearing a red tunic on which there were several jeweled decorations. On his head was a turban of green with a red star exactly in the middle of it, just above the forehead. Obviously it was the remnant of a large full-length portrait, for while only the head and upper part of the body were shown, it was evident from what was to be seen of the left arm that the picture as a whole most certainly depicted the subject as holding a lance in his extended hand. It was in a crude, hand-made frame. Afterwards Starcourt was to learn that it was a portrait of the rebel Duke of Droon, Jonifer's ancestor.

There was a red Turkish rug on the floor, a bench over against the wall, two heavy brass-bound chests, a Persian lantern suspended from the ceiling, and that was all. The couch or ottoman on which he reposed was wide and comfortable, the counterpane, if such it may be called, a huge oriental tapestry lined with silk.

Strange to say, he was beginning to feel drowsy and would have fallen asleep despite his efforts to keep awake had not the door opened suddenly to admit a small, bent old man wearing spectacles through which he squinted in an alert, near-sighted way. He had scraggly white whiskers and carried a leather bag in his hand.

"Hullo! Who are you?" demanded Starcourt, raising himself on his elbow.

"I am Professor Gratz come to attend you. Force of circumstances,—lie still, young man, there's a good fellow,—force of circumstances has made me a man of many parts, many professions, you might say. I am a doctor, a surgeon,

a leech, a dentist, a barber, an apothecary, a taxidermist, a tinker, an undertaker, an astrologer,—I could go on, *ad captandum vulgus*, for hours, but as it takes more than one to make a crowd I shall confine myself to the business in hand. I may add," he went on with a chuckle as he began removing lancets, scalpels, forceps, pincers, scissors, bottles and all sorts of things from the bag, "that I might also be termed a midwife. Now, let me see. Let me have a look at it. A slight accident, Jonifer Davos informs me. Accidents are likely to occur at—ah, so it hurts, eh? Hum! Ha! I see. Well, a little of this liniment,—good for man, beast and woman. And a powder to soften the pangs of— Do not be alarmed, young man. I am not going to use all or any of these instruments on your misshapen crown."

And presently he took his departure, having gently rubbed the knot, administered a powder, and cautioned his patient not to stand on his head if he wished to avoid pain or complications. He paused at the door to remind the young man that he was always at his service in case he needed a barber, an undertaker or an astrologer.

"What I need most is a tailor," called Starcourt.

"If I had your body I would see the tailors in purgatory before I would permit them to sew me up in rags," said Professor Gratz, closing the door.

Funny old codger, thought the patient, and there was a smile on his lips when he fell asleep a few minutes later. He slept as one drugged.

When he finally opened his eyes and stared hazily about him, the sun had crossed the valley and was almost on the point of plunging down behind the western peaks. For a long time he lay perfectly still, trying to consolidate the impressions which were darting here, there and everywhere in his puzzled brain. Then his gaze rested upon a pile of clothing on the bench over against the wall. He got up, drank half the con-

tents of a gourdful of water, and went over to inspect the garments.

"Well, I'm dashed!" he exclaimed aloud.

He found a comparatively new suit of gray English tweeds, together with shoes, stockings, shirt, underwear and a white stock, such as was being worn in London by well-dressed men of the period. (A certain sergeant would have remembered seeing a suit of clothes very similar to this one on the person of the courageous traveler who had killed two robbers on the road to Balak not so many weeks before.)

"Well, speaking as a beggar without a stitch to his back, there's nothing to do but choose the gray tweeds,—so here goes, fit or no fit."

And in a little while he opened the door and walked out into the open air, fully and quite satisfactorily attired in the cherished suit of clothes Jonifer Davos had purchased (for cash) in St. Petersburg the season before. Colonel Starcourt's new wardrobe, however, did not include a hat. He was rather thankful for that. "Not clothes," said he, "but hats make the man. Hats and shoes."

He found himself in what he rightly supposed to be the fringe of the forest. Scarce fifty yards separated the house from open country beyond. Striding quickly toward the edge of the wood, he stopped short and stared about him in utter amazement and incredulity.

Before him lay fields in which men were toiling with scythe and fork and rake; and there were horses and carts, cows in pasture, flocks of geese waddling across stubble fields, hay cocks and shocks of harvested grain. He rubbed his eyes. Then he looked to the right, following the road that skirted the fields. There he beheld houses, quaint, squat houses with thatched roofs, blue doors, flower gardens and vines—and women in skirts and short smocks of bright, varying colors

working among their vegetables, chatting in the roadway, or hurrying along with milk pails.

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "Am I in some peaceful Swiss valley? Am I—" Then once more his gaze went up to the lofty, snow-capped peaks that first had caught his eye as he approached the road, and shook his head. "No, this is the valley from which there is no escape. This is the land of Jonifer."

A woman was approaching. As she drew nearer, coming from the direction in which the houses lay, he observed that she was young and slender—and that she walked rapidly. She was not dressed as were the women of the fields and garden patches.

Her face was not brown, her dress was not that of a gypsy, but he knew who she was long before she came within speaking distance.

CHAPTER IX

GERANE'S BIRTHDAY PRESENT

MEANWHILE Jonifer the Hawk was having his troubles. To begin with, the men who had gone out with him to seize Starcourt were in an ugly frame of mind; and to their grumblings, later on, was added the outspoken condemnation of women who had lost husbands and relatives on the occasion of a former attempt to surprise and capture the young commander of dragoons. What Jonifer's men could not understand nor condone was the loss of an opportunity to wreak vengeance upon the very men who killed their comrades on the Semlik road. They had gone forth in the belief that they were to fall upon and slay every man in Starcourt's party except the leader himself, who was to be taken alive and unscathed at all costs. And what had happened? Not a mandog was killed! Not one of them shot or knifed! It was not their idea of revenge. Jonifer had had his way and they had been cheated. What had they got out of it? They would have to face these women and confess to them that they had spared the slayers of their loved ones, simply to suit the whim of Jonifer Davos, who, when all was said and done, had accomplished all that he had set out to do, namely: to obtain a prize for his daughter Gerane on her twentieth birthday! Not that they begrudged the gift to Gerane,—indeed, they felt just the other way about it,—but it maddened them to think that they might have given her her heart's desire and at the same time gratified their own while they were about it.

The men were waiting for him when he came down to the road after leaving Starcourt. Dawn had just broken. A

lean, scowling fellow who had arrogated unto himself the right to speak for the disgruntled company, faced Jonifer.

"We want to have a few words with you, Jonifer Davos," said he, boldly.

The pleased smile faded from the chieftain's lips. "Well, what is it? I am in a hurry. My daughter is—"

"Well, you will have to take the time to hear what I have to say to you," commenced the other, sticking out his under jaw. "We want you to know just how we feel about the way you managed things last night to suit yourself without giving us a chance to blow the heads off of—"

"Just a moment!" interrupted Jonifer, harshly. "Are you the leader of this—am I to call it a meeting?"

"Call it what you please. We do not like the way you—"

"You men agreed to go out with me to accomplish a certain purpose," said Jonifer, levelly. "We have accomplished it. That is all there is to be said about the matter, so far as I am concerned, or any of the rest of you, for that matter. I am grateful to all of you for what you did. If it had been necessary to kill a score of men to make our plan succeed, I was prepared, as you all know, to do that very thing. Luck was with us. We did what we set out to do without shedding a single drop of blood. But this is another matter. You wanted blood last night, Boaz. You shall have it now. Draw!"

He whipped out his shortsword. Boaz was not a coward. He jerked his own weapon from the scabbard and threw himself into an attitude of defense. A second later Jonifer was upon him. The clash of steel, once, twice,—and then Boaz went down with a sword driven through his heart.

Jonifer withdrew the blade and turned to face the startled, stunned spectators.

"There can be but one leader here," he said slowly. "That man was one of the bravest in the valley. I am sorry it had

to happen, but there is only one way to check rebellion. He was born here. His father before him was born here and he was a loyal man. You chose Boaz to be your spokesman and your leader. Is there any one among you who desires to take his place, now that he is dead? 'Tis well. Either I am Jonifer the Great or I am Jonifer the Weak. I was that man's friend. I would have fought and died for him,—aye, I have fought for him and saved his life, as all of you well know,—and I gave him an even chance to kill me just now. What more could he ask, what more could you have asked for him? Bury him, my friends,—but not beside his father, who was an honest, loyal man. Beside his mother, yes,—for she brought him into the world and loved him well, poor soul. Is there one among you who would further question my conduct of last night? Well, then!" He drove the point of his weapon deep into the trunk of a tree and with a mighty wrench snapped it off close to the hilt. Throwing the useless grip to the ground, he said: 'It has killed its last man. Julius, do you fetch your hammer and drive that steel so deep into the tree that it may not be withdrawn. Then let it remain there forever." He stooped, picked up the dead man's weapon and thrust it into his own empty scabbard. "A sturdy, honest blade and not befouled. I have taken it in fair combat. Henceforth I shall go armed with my enemy's sword. So be it."

With that he strode off across the dew-drenched grass without so much as a glance over his shoulder.

Thus was the first of his troubles put behind him. Later on in the day he was pleased to find that his staunchest supporters in the controversy with the widows and mothers were the men who had witnessed the summary execution of their own ill-fated mouthpiece.

But he had greater trouble in store for him, and from a most unexpected quarter. He was stabling his tired horse

when Gerane, just out of bed, came running toward the sheds. His somber eyes lighted up; the stern, hard lines about his mouth relaxed into a smile; the slowly stiffening body down there at the edge of the wood was forgotten. His dogs were cavorting about him, barking ecstatically; his beloved horses were whinnying; and geese were hissing at him, but not with scorn. He caught the flying, scantily clad damsel to his breast —and was warmed by a vast sense of exultation. What a glorious surprise he had in store for her!

Presently she said to him: "How tired and hungry you must be! I shall prepare breakfast for you with my own hands. That lazy Eljie is still abed. And oh, how different is this birthday from the last. Have you forgotten that I am twenty to-day and growing very, very old and decrepit?"

He gave a mighty laugh. "Forgotten it? Bless your heart, —no! You shall see whether I have forgotten it or not. I have brought you the most gorgeous—"

"I will not accept another jewel—not one," she broke in, frowning darkly.

"Well, now, run away, little girl," said Jonifer, in high good humor. "Breakfast first, birthday presents afterwards. And such a bonfire as we will have to-night has never been known before. The man in the moon will hold his hands before his face to keep the flames from scorching it."

He chuckled as he continued with his task. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind as to the final outcome of his latest achievement. Confidently, even fatuously, he went back twenty odd years for confirmation. Had not the haughty, imperious Louise come to the valley a captive? And did she not live to find her fate a pleasant one? Then why should not the same thing happen to young Starcourt? How could he help falling in love with Gerane? He could not help it, he could not humanly help it, was Jonifer's serene conviction. And after they were married,—well, he was not concerned

about the future. When the time came for Starcourt to leave the valley, if such a time ever did come, he would take with him a wife for whose sake he would die rather than reveal her past or betray the secret of the hills. And that is what true love meant in the lexicon of Jonifer Davos.

Nevertheless he decided to waste no time in putting a guard at the mouth of the defile and keeping it there, day and night, until Starcourt succumbed to the inevitable.

Gerane herself brought his breakfast to the "big room," having arbitrarily taken the matter out of Eljie's hands. There was a great pot of steaming coffee, sizzling slabs of smoked ham, hot rye cakes and a dish of honey. Her father had removed his boots and coat; he had washed and refreshed himself at the well and had brushed his long thick hair with more than usual care. Gerane surveyed him with suspicion.

"You look for all the world like a cat that has just swallowed a bird, father," she remarked. "I've never seen you smirk like that before." So she proceeded at once to rumple his hair.

"Sit down," said he, still smiling. "Or don't you dare take a chance on eating the food you have cooked? Am I to have the honor of your company at breakfast, mademoiselle?"

"Now, I know something has happened that you are ashamed of," said she, sternly. "You are trying to get on the good side of me."

"What would you like more than anything else for a birthday present?" inquired he, magnificently.

She was pouring out his coffee.

"I have wants at all prices," she replied, guardedly, after a moment. "But nothing cheap and tawdry, like diamonds."

He took a long time telling her. He enjoyed himself so much that he could not resist dragging it out. Finally leaning back in his chair and, sticking his thumbs in his armpits, he produced his thunderclap:

"I went out last night and captured Colonel Starcourt and brought him home, Gerane, as a present for you on your twentieth birthday."

For a long time she stared at him, squinting her eyes a little as if doubting whether she had heard aright.

"Starcourt," explained Jonifer. "That young dragoon." He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing in a sort of ludicrous astonishment. "Now, by all the saints, am I to hear you say that you don't know who I mean? Starcourt! The handsome young— Surely you remember the— My God! Have I made a mistake?"

"Starcourt?" she faltered. "The young officer—" Speech failed her. She could only stare.

"To be sure," he exclaimed. "Who else, my dear? Bless me! You gave me quite a turn. For a moment I—"

"You are telling me that you—that you captured Colonel Starcourt and—and brought him here?" She had gone very pale.

"Aye! As a birthday present for you. He is yours to—"

She sprang to her feet. A dark red surged to her face. Jonifer's jaw fell.

"Good God above us!" she cried out. "Do I hear aright? Am I awake? Are you really sitting there, or is it a dream that I am having?"

"It is—it is a dream come true," stammered Jonifer, hopefully. "He is out there in my—"

Now he actually quailed. The great Jonifer quailed! Her blazing eyes were upon him.

"And since when have I asked you to go out into the highway and capture a man for me?" she demanded, slowly, ominously.

He got to his feet. "Now, now, Gerane,—" he began.

"Am I so in need of playthings that you must go forth and

steal a man for me as you would steal jewels from Leopold Mathias and other—"

"I thought you would be pleased. I did it only to make you happy, Gerane," explained the bewildered Jonifer. "Sink me in hell, if I understand you women. You have been mooning about the place, sighing and dreaming about—"

He got no farther than this. It was a long time before he could, with any success at all, break in upon her sometimes furious, sometimes pathetic characterization of his incomprehensible deed.

"You have shamed me," she cried among other things, with a sob in her voice. "I cannot look him in the face. I shall die of mortification. He will sneer at me,—and who can blame him? I shall go up into the woods and hide until you have taken him away and given him back to his people, to the place of honor he holds in—"

"Stop! Be sensible, Gerane," broke in Jonifer, at this point. He was very white as he towered above her on the opposite side of the table. "Are you forgetting that your own mother, the noblest woman in the world, came here a prisoner, hating us all, sneering at my father, at me, cursing us for beasts and reviling us with every breath and thought? Stop, I say! She was ten thousand times finer in every way than this—"

"That argument does not fit this case," she interrupted scathingly. "My mother was not trapped and brought here as a—as a mere birthday present. Oh, to think of it! A birthday present! You go out and pick him up and bring him to me, saying here is your birthday present, dear. Tame him! Teach him to eat out of your hand and do tricks— Oh, father, how could you shame me so!"

Whereupon she shed galling tears, and when he would have comforted her, stamped her foot and flounced from the room with this as a parting though inconsistent shot:

"I refuse to see him! I refuse to accept your ridiculous present. I shall marry my cousin Peter,—or Matthew or Joseph. And I shall go straightway to him and show him the way out of this—this detestable valley!"

"Now, curse me,—" began Jonifer, but she was gone.

Late that afternoon she emerged from her room and started off briskly in the direction of the house where Starcourt was confined. There was resolution in her manner, purpose in her stormy eyes. But, in spite of this, her heart was pounding strangely,—as it had been for hours, and she was conscious of a timidity that all but caused her to turn and run like a deer in the opposite direction. It was her intention to face Starcourt, tell him that she had not been consulted beforehand, and to assure him in no uncertain terms that so far as she was concerned he could rest in peace, for she would have nothing further to do with him as long as she lived. After which she would walk quietly, calmly away and go up into the hills to reside forever with old Dame Marget, who was a very devout woman and abhorred sin so bitterly that she had not been down in the evil valley since the death of her husband, thirty years before.

All this was firmly fixed in her mind until she caught sight of the strange man in civilian clothes standing at the edge of the wood above the road. She blinked her eyes. Who could this stranger be? Certainly not Colonel Starcourt. He would be in the bright, resplendent uniform of—and then she recognized him. He was looking at her intently. A scant fifty feet separated them. She stopped short, suddenly overcome by a panic of mingled shame and diffidence and embarrassment. Her heart thumped so violently that she was alarmed. Every vestige of courage deserted her. After a moment of indecision she turned and walked swiftly into the wood, her chin in the air, her cheeks flaming. She was grateful to her legs. She heard him call out to her but did not pause. Instead, when

convinced that the trees had blotted her from sight, she broke into an undignified run.

And for the next fortnight she avoided him as if he were the plague itself. Nothing that Jonifer could do or say affected her determination. He cursed and pleaded in turn and was sorely tried by her incredible perversity. Matilde argued with her, Broadaxe gave ponderous counsel, Eljie and Rosa eyed her with obvious disapproval, and other men and women, while holding their tongues in her presence, favored her with sly, tantalizing grins and side glances that were far more infuriating than words.

But she did not go up to old Dame Marget's hut in the forest. On the contrary, she walked or rode boldly, defiantly about the valley as was her custom,—and was sadly in need of spiritual help, for her thoughts were blasphemous although she would have died rather than utter them aloud even in the privacy and solitude of the forest.

Once she lost control of herself completely and put the quirt to Selim's flanks as she was riding in solitary gloom through one of the woodland roads. It was the first time she had ever struck him with the whip. The horse was no more surprised than she,—and not half so cruelly hurt. Instantly she brought him to a standstill, flung herself from the saddle, threw her arms about his head and caressed him, almost sobbing her most contrite apologies to the trembling beast.

It goes without saying that there was no bonfire on the night of her anniversary. She put her foot down on that so peremptorily and unyieldingly that for the first time since she was four years old the annual celebration was not held.

She had viewed the cart bearing the corpse of Nicolas Boaz as it wended its way past her house to the graveyard at the lower end of the valley. Half a dozen men and women walked slowly behind it. Her eyes were clouded. What a terrible man her father was, after all,—how relentless! And

she could plainly see Starcourt's far-off figure as he stood by the roadside watching the sorry little funeral procession. She wondered if he knew how Nicolas had met his death.

As time went on she could not help remarking the conduct of the people of the valley toward the prisoner. She was surprised and annoyed by their friendly attitude—but, more than that, it vexed her beyond words to see that Starcourt accepted these advances without the slightest sign of repugnance. Indeed, so far as she could make out, he behaved very much as if he liked it. Time and again she had noticed him chatting amiably with the men, frequently accepting a light for his pipe (which she had no difficulty in recognizing as a particularly vile one belonging to Julius Broadaxe), or plodding along beside some toiling laborer in the fields. And he was particularly courteous to the women. Notably, for example: Professor Gratz's silly but good-looking daughter Neva, or Barnabas Hutch's grandniece, or Jakob Kemlin's widow (and young Jakob dead not more than a year!), or Flavia Melby, Jan Melby's cow-eyed wife. True, she was bound to admit, he seldom smiled, and there was a certain haggardness about his face that troubled her in spite of the fact that she had made up her mind never to notice him at all. She would have given anything, however, to be able to ask Matilde what he said to her when they met and conversed on several occasions. Her grudge against her father was not lessened by the conviction that he and Starcourt apparently were on the best of terms! At least, she supposed so, although Jonifer was careful never to mention his name in her presence. He had ignored certain of her commands until he found it was useless to continue when she took to putting her fingers to her ears and humming loudly while he was speaking.

Then one day the inevitable happened. She was returning from a ride through the forest. Selim, brought down to a

walk in descending a sharp curve in the road, suddenly pricked up his ears and shied. A man stepped out from among the trees and stood directly in her path, his arms extended.

"Halt!" he commanded. There was a smile on his face as he added, warningly: "Stand and deliver! Your money or your life."

For a moment she was speechless. Her face went scarlet. Then her eyes flashed angrily.

"Stand aside!" she cried out. "I will run you down. I will,—I swear I will." She raised the gad to strike the horse.

"Come ahead," he invited, cheerfully.

"How—how dare you, sir!" she cried, and, much to her own chagrin, drew rein.

"Every one else is kind to me here, Miss Davos. Every one else is friendly. What have I done to you that you should avoid me so—"

"You—you haven't done anything," she interrupted, quickly. "Only," she went on, lifting her chin, "I do not wish to speak to you. Stand aside, please." She was pale now.

"But, my dear Miss Davos, I wish to speak to you," said he seriously. "Of course, if you insist, I shall obey your command. If you are determined to—"

For a second time she interrupted. "Do you know why you were brought to this valley, Colonel Starcourt?" she demanded, the red flooding her cheeks again.

"Yes. Mutual acquaintances,—chiefly women, I may say, —have enlightened me. It seems to be a joke to them. I am inclined to the belief that it is not a joke to either you or me. Still, since I am supposed to be your property, you might at least treat me with the kindness you would accord a pet dog or cat or even a horse. Unless I have been misinformed, Miss Davos, I belong to you."

She was now able to study him coolly before replying.

"That being the case, it should be my privilege to do just as I please with you. And it pleases me to—to tell you to go to the devil!"

He bowed. "If I thought you really meant that, Miss Davos, I should be very unhappy. But I am quite sure you don't want me to go to the devil at all."

"You are impertinent, sir. I do mean it."

"Won't you dismount and walk the rest of the way home with me?" he asked, unperturbed.

A little twinkle came unbidden to her eyes, and a sharp observer would have caught the faint trace of a dimple in her cheek. Starcourt was a sharp observer.

"Is that your conception of obedience? I ordered you to go to the devil."

His face clouded. "I wonder if you realize that I've been in hell for two weeks. Telling me to go to the devil is like carrying coals to Newcastle. However, I have made up my mind to be philosophical about it. I am a prisoner here. God only knows for how long. A year ago I told your father I would return one day to bring him to his knees. Well, here I am. He has brought me to your knees. No use lamenting. No use quarreling with luck. I boasted and I have failed. Tell me to go to the devil as often as you like, Miss Davos. My sincerest regret is that I am not able to do your bidding. It would give me the greatest pleasure in the world to go to the devil,—and be done with it."

He was not looking at her. Instead, his gaze was fixed on the guerdon of peaks visible through an opening among the trees. His shoulders had sagged a little, his bearing was one of utter dejection.

Gerane did not speak. She could not. Pity stifled her. She looked down upon his wavy, unkempt hair; she saw his hard-set jaw quiver. Her blue eyes softened. He went on:

"I wish you would let me thank you for trying to intercede

for me that morning on the highway. I haven't forgotten it, Miss Davos."

She burst out impulsively: "I am sorry,—oh, so sorry, Colonel Starcourt."

He looked up at her, a wry smile on his lips. "For telling me to go to the devil or for interceding in my behalf?"

"I did not mean it when I told you to go to— No, what I mean is this: I am sorry this has happened to you. I—I wish I could—oh, I wish you had never been brought to this place. You must believe me. I mean it. From the bottom of my heart, I mean it."

He was silent for a moment, enthralled by the loveliness of her deep, compassionate eyes. Then he shook his head slowly.

"You mean it, I suppose, but I am afraid you do not quite understand what my intentions were up to the time I was made captive. It was my intention to either kill your father and all of his men or see to it that they were beheaded. It was my desire and aim to capture you and have you locked up in the Tower for—well, perhaps the rest of your life. And it all might have come to pass if this had not happened to me. It still may come to pass, Miss Davos. I will be honest with you,—as I am with your father. I am praying, night and day, for my deliverance by a force of men powerful enough to—I was about to say kill every man, woman and child in this valley."

She uttered a scornful, angry little laugh. "You are a very bloodthirsty person, Colonel Starcourt. What have the children done that you should wish to slay them? Are you a second Herod? I can understand your desire to kill my father and me and all the rest of the robbers,—but spare, I beseech you, the innocent babes and helpless children."

"You choose to be sarcastic. But put yourself in my place. Even you, a girl, would have it in your heart to slay right and left. If you were thrown into the Tower, for example, would

you love your gaolers? If you were a captive here in this nest of robbers, would you consider your lot a happy one? I fancy not, Miss Davos."

She pondered this. After a moment, she replied: "Have you heard the story of my mother, Colonel Starcourt? No? She was brought here a captive by my grandfather. Ask some one else to tell you her story, ask some one to tell you who she was and whence she came. It may interest you."

"Your mother came here as a captive?" he exclaimed, in surprise.

"And died here among thieves and robbers, contented with her lot. Now, be good enough to let me pass."

"I understand now why you have blue eyes and soft brown hair and are so unlike all the rest. It has puzzled me," was his comment. He still had his hand on Selim's bridle-bit.

She had difficulty in hiding her pleasure. So he had noticed her, he had been thinking about her! She averted her eyes to keep them from betraying her.

"Well, you need not puzzle yourself any longer about me," she said, ungraciously. "Come, Selim!"

"Wait, please," he protested. "Is there any reason why we cannot be friends, Miss Davos?"

No one had ever called her Miss Davos before. All her life she had been addressed as Gerane. To be sure, there were times when people called her "Princess," "Your Serene Highness," "Little Queen," but always in jest. It sounded very strange to her, this "Miss Davos."

"I do not see how you can expect me to be your friend when you have just finished telling me how much pleasure it would give you to kill me or put me in prison."

"Well," he began drolly, "can't we be friends until the time comes to kill you? Besides, that time may never come. Now here is a fair proposition. I am not at all sure that your father may not have me taken out and shot when he discovers

that you have no use for me. Therefore, what could be fairer than this? Let's be friends until he shoots me or I shoot you."

She looked puzzled for a moment and then broke into a giggle, genuine merriment in her eyes. In an instant, however, she sobered.

"But it is impossible. Under the circumstances, I refuse to have anything to do with you. Please remember this in future, Colonel Starcourt, and do not presume to—"

"My dear Miss Davos," he interrupted, "if my father had gone out and captured you and brought you home to give to me, even as a plaything or a curio, I would at least do my best to let him see that I appreciated his generosity, even though I hated you."

"I do not hate you," she cried impulsively, and bit her lip.

"Then get down and walk with me to—"

"I do not choose to," she exclaimed haughtily. "And if I tell my father that you have been annoying me, he will—he will make you pay dearly, let me tell you that, sir."

"I have already begged him to shoot me, you know. For some strange reason he refuses."

"He is a perfect fool," she answered hotly.

"I disagree with you there. I look upon your father as one of the cleverest men I have ever known."

"Don't you dare make sport of my father!"

"Bless me! Nothing could have been farther from my thoughts!"

"He is the best man in the world. I don't care what you or all the rest of your goody-goody friends think of him. He is better than all of you put together."

"I applaud your inconsistency," said he, bowing profoundly —and almost losing his grip on Selim's bridle. "But I am sorely afraid he has spoiled you. From what I hear, he has always given you everything you wanted."

"I could throw some of the things in his face."

"You couldn't very well throw me in his face, now could you?"

She met this with unexpected adroitness. "I was thinking of expensive things, Colonel Starcourt," she replied, lifting her chin.

"Well played," he said, with a wry grimace. "I am the most inexpensive present he has ever given you, I'll admit. I didn't cost him a penny,—not even a charge of powder."

She regarded him darkly for a moment, having detected the note of sadness and chagrin in his voice.

"I repeat what I said in the beginning, Colonel Starcourt," she said, in a gentler tone. "I am sorry this has happened to you. It was none of my doing."

"I believe you," said he, releasing the bit. "Forgive my effrontery. We know each other better now and I shall keep my place hereafter."

She experienced a distinct sensation of dismay and was glad that he was in the act of tendering her a respectful bow which prevented him from observing the tell-tale alarm in her eyes.

"I wish I could help you, Colonel Starcourt," she said, rather bleakly. "If it were possible for me to obtain your release from—"

"That is quite impossible," he interrupted. "But I wish there was a way of letting my mother know that I am alive —and in good hands. I think that is what hurts me more than anything else. My poor, poor mother! I love her more than anything else in the world."

She gulped painfully. "I—I will speak to my father about it. He may—"

"Thank you, but it would do no good. I have already spoken to him about it. He is sorry, but he prefers that I should be looked upon as—as dead, Miss Davos."

Starcourt could have sworn he heard a chuckle break on

her lips as she rode away. But he did her an injustice. It was not a chuckle.

He watched her till she disappeared around a bend in the road, a graceful, supple figure astride the fleet Selim. A little smile played about his lips long after the dark green tunic and the hat with the jaunty red feather were lost to sight. It was a faintly satiric smile, for Gavan Starcourt imagined that he understood women. But, for that matter, so did Solomon, who was a very wise man and lived to a great age.

"A damned little spitfire," thought he, as he walked slowly down the road in her wake. "But, by gad, she is lovely. I've never seen a prettier girl in all my life. Too bad she's what she is. Go to the devil, eh? Gad, once or twice I saw the devil himself in her eyes. It wouldn't have surprised me if she had slashed me across the face with her whip. A damned spitfire, but a pretty one."

He dreamed of her that night and awoke to find himself in a cold perspiration. In his dreams she was gleefully pricking him with the sharp point of a knife and laughing at his appeals for mercy. She had him securely tied to a tree.

Now Gerane also had a dream. And in it she walked in a beautiful garden with a beautiful lady who rejoiced greatly to hear that her son was alive and in good hands, and thanked her with tears in her eyes for bringing the message from him.

CHAPTER X

FOR HUMANITY'S SAKE?

"I HAVE an idea," said Broadaxe one day to Jonifer. They were seated on a log high up among the trees on the mountainside. Behind them, some distance away, was the cave in which practically all of the rich booty taken by the robbers was stored as soon as it was brought into the valley, there to await the leader's semi-annual trips with such "goods" as could be readily disposed of in the jewel marts of the Near East. Before them, to the west, lay the towering mountains, below them the snug green vale in which they lived, a bowl, so to speak, the dimensions of which were so insignificant that they appeared ludicrous from this lofty point of observation and yet it was two miles wide and almost twice that in length. Jonifer and his companion, resting after the climb up the steep, were nearly a mile higher than the bottom of the bowl.

"Well," said the chieftain, gloomily, "that is more than I have, Julius."

They had been discussing Gerane and her maddening attitude toward Starcourt. Crisp autumn had laid its brown hand upon field and forest. A month had passed since the young dragoon entered the valley and, except for the single encounter in the wood, Jonifer's daughter steadfastly had adhered to her resolve to have nothing whatever to do with him.

"She vows, by all that's holy, that she will not even speak to him," said Broadaxe, puffing rather spitefully at his pipe. "That is the situation, as I see it, eh?"

"In a nutshell" said Jonifer, succinctly.

"And by that we are to judge that she has no use for him—none whatever."

"No more than she has for the stuff that we took from Leopold Mathias,—or anything else, for that matter. She says she despises everything that has been stolen."

"In that respect, Jonifer, she is more like her mother than she is like you."

"Get on with your idea, if you have one," growled the other.

"Well, since she pretends she has no use for him,—"

"Pretends?"

"Aye, that is what I am coming to. Pretends she has no use for him and cannot abide the sight of him, and as he is of no value to the rest of us, being a luxury and a hardship, as you might say, what could be more satisfactory to all parties concerned than for you to order him taken out and shot and his carcass fed to the wolves?"

"I am not a bloody murderer," interrupted Jonifer, coldly.

"Lord love you, man, I wouldn't have the poor fellow shot,—not for worlds. I like him. But now, supposing you were to issue an order to shoot him simply because your daughter cannot bear the sight of him and there is no use having him around any longer,—why, don't you see, Jonifer?"

"I am blessed if I do."

"Then you haven't the brains of a black-beetle," announced Broadaxe, scathingly.

"I grant you that," gloomed Jonifer.

"Well, see if you can get this through that thick head of yours. What would Gerane do when she heard that he was to be shot? We know she is in love with him. I will tell you what she would do. She would get off her high-horse so quickly you couldn't—"

"I am beginning to see," broke in her father, his eyes brightening.

"And she would take him under her wing and fight for him like a—"

"You are a genius, Broadaxe."

"And as I was about to say, she would claim him as her property and defy you to touch him."

Jonifer stared reflectively at the ground. It sounded well enough and no doubt it would all turn out as Broadaxe prophesied, but—

"There is one point you overlook, Julius," he said, frowning uneasily. "Suppose he refuses to fall in love with her,—what then?"

"Refuses?" boomed Julius, aghast. "It isn't possible. There is not a man on earth who would refuse to fall in love with Gerane. He might hate to do it, and he might refuse to marry her, but, by Jove, he couldn't refuse to fall in love with her. It wouldn't be human nature."

Jonifer smiled. "I see you are picking up a little English from Starcourt," he said.

"Well, he's teaching me how to swear in English," explained Broadaxe, rather shamefacedly. "He tells me that 'by Jove' is the most vicious profanity that— But this is neither here nor there. He is human, isn't he? And he is young, isn't he? Well, then, what the devil are you afraid of, Jonifer Davos? You know the big statue down in Regengetz Circus, don't you? It's made of stone, it isn't even human, and they say it's five hundred years old, but I'll wager my head it would fall in love with Gerane inside of five minutes if it had a chance."

Jonifer shook his head. "You never can tell," said he. "Gerane may not appeal to Starcourt at all. I have been thinking a great deal about that very thing lately. Suppose she were to offer her love to him and he—" He could not finish the sentence, so Julius did it for him in his own way.

"Laughed at her, eh?" His brow got as black as a thunder-

cloud. He smote his knee with a mighty fist. "Then all I have to say is that if he hasn't sense enough to fall in love with her he deserves to be boiled in oil. Shooting would be too good for him. He—"

"Control yourself, Julius! And listen to me. We must find out, first of all, if it be possible, whether he has—er—any tender regard for her. The safe thing to do—"

"And if we discover he hasn't any tender regard for her, shoot him on the spot and have done with it."

"Now, you have talked with him frequently. He seems to have taken a great fancy to you. Has he at any time, or in any way, given you the impression that he is attracted by—I mean, would you say that he is—er—interested in her in—er—that way?"

Julius gave the question weighty consideration. He pursed his lips, scowled thoughtfully and scratched his head.

"Well," said he at last, "now that I think of it, he asked me the other day to tell him the story of her mother."

"You told him that she was a lady, a noble lady?"

"I did. And, moreover, I told him that you have royal blood in your veins."

"Of which I am ashamed," snorted Jonifer.

"I think he felt the same way about it," acknowledged honest Julius. "He says that Europe is full of people who have royal blood in their veins all unbeknownst to gentlemen who take it for granted that they are their fathers. However, he was especially interested in Gerane's mother. That looks to me as if he is by way of starting up a tender regard for Louise's daughter."

"Idle curiosity," grunted Jonifer.

"He said that he would give a good deal to see the portrait of her that you have in the big room, Jonifer. Only, he complained, he could not enter your house as long as your daughter forbids him to come there."

"Ha! What nonsense is this? It is my house, not hers. He shall come there this very afternoon. In fact, he must come, if we have to drag him there. See to it, Julius, that he comes by my invitation. If necessary, inform him it is my command. He shall see this portrait of Gerane's mother. True, it does not do her justice, but—"

"But about this shooting of him," interrupted the unromantic blacksmith. "My idea would be to say nothing to Gerane about it at present. Let her go on being stubborn and idiotic and then allow her to find out from some one else that you have issued orders to shoot Starcourt and that she is not to bother her head about him any longer. Seeing as she does not want him around and as we cannot turn him loose to bring the whole army of Graustark here to slaughter us, why, the only way out of it is to execute him forthwith,—and then she can be happy ever afterwards. Let the word get to her that he is to be shot the very next day without consulting her about it, and—"

"She would take my head off!" expostulated Jonifer.

"Let her," advised Broadaxe, promptly. "But do not give in to her. Then the next evening blindfold Starcourt and march him down to the gap with his hands tied behind his back. Have a squad of men with rifles go along to—"

"But suppose she declines to interfere? I do not want to shoot him."

"Never fear," said Julius, quite complacently for him. "She will put a stop to it. She will not permit it. She is in love with him, or else I am a fool. And when she gets through telling you and the rest of us what she thinks of us, we will sneak off with our tails between our legs. Then, unless I miss my guess, she will lead Starcourt out of the valley of death and—and—well, to sum it up in a few words, she will change her tune."

"I will think it over," said Jonifer, arising. "Come along. We have other matters to attend to now."

A climb of fifty feet up a sharp, jagged incline brought them to the mouth of the treasure cave. A stout, heavy-timbered door confronted them, secured by three enormous padlocks. Jonifer carried the key of one of them, one was in the possession of Julius while the third, borrowed by the chieftain, was consigned in the custody of Jahn Crispo. The locks were different, so that entrance to the cave could not be effected unless all three keys were used. As a rule, the door was never opened except in the presence of and by the consent of the three custodians, but on this occasion, Crispo voluntarily surrendered his key to Jonifer. The door, set in a crude, but solidly constructed bit of masonry, was not very large,—indeed, Jonifer was obliged to stoop low in passing through it. It opened into a narrow passage, some thirty or forty feet long, and this ended in a fairly commodious cavern, where the booty was stored.

Jonifer was inserting his key in the padlock when the big smith remarked:

"Now, here is another point, Jonifer. She must be interested in him or she would not be ordering you to come all the way up here and pick out for his use this winter the very finest fur coat and cap and neck cape we have in stock, as you might say. That goes to prove she is not absolutely indifferent, does it not?"

"Common humanity," grunted Jonifer. "She doesn't want him to freeze to death."

"I grant you that, but he was welcome to one of my bear-skin coats, or yours. They would keep him warm. But, no; she insists he must have a sable coat. He must have nothing but the very best."

He turned the key in the third padlock. Just inside the

door, Jonifer picked up a huge lantern and lighted it. Then, bending low, they made their way to the cavern beyond. This room was fifty or sixty feet long and roughly oval in shape, with a level floor of solid rock. It had a vaulted, jagged roof, the center being perhaps twenty feet above the floor. Cold air filled this chamber, coming through a narrow crevice between floor and wall at the back of the cave. This slit was no wider than a man's hand and while no one had been able to determine its range beyond the length of a sapling employed for the purpose, it was obvious that it led to some vast subterranean cavern deep in the heart of the mountain with an as yet undiscovered surface outlet, perhaps miles away on the side looking out upon the pass in which lay the Inn of the Hawk and Raven. This much only did Jonifer and his men know: full two miles of earth and rock and snow lay between the cave and the tip of the peak overhead.

The glittering aspect of Aladdin's fabled cave was missing here. No shining pots of gold, no heaps of sparkling gems were revealed by the lantern which Jonifer placed on a rude table in the middle of the chamber. Its rays fell upon a large number of stout chests arranged in orderly fashion along the walls, all of them securely locked. Close examination would have shown that each was marked with the name of its owner. If one had the eyes to penetrate the sides of these chests he would have beheld bags of golden coins, gems and other material proofs of the enterprise and thrift of the thieves of Droon Forest. He would have seen the fruits of harvests reaped on the King's Highway over a period of many audacious years. Misers, so to speak, were these rogues. They hoarded in anticipation of the promised days of profligacy that were to come.

For there was an ironclad compact among them permitting any man to take his possessions, if he chose to do so, at the

end of twenty years, leave the valley and go forth into the world to live as he pleased.

In the course of the last four or five years, more than a score of men and their families had forsaken the nest, and so loyal were they to the oath they had taken that in no instance had they betrayed their comrades or revealed the existence of the secret valley. Some of them, reduced to poverty, had returned to the nest for the purpose of acquiring another fortune! But not one could be charged with the gravest of all crimes, treachery. There were many, like Broadaxe, and Dykas, and Gratz, for example, who had lived in this pocket of nature far beyond the term of years allotted them, and no doubt would stay there till the end of their days. Jonifer Davos and the male members of his family (which included the despised offspring of his Uncle Joseph) ironically recognized as the ruling house, had taken oath never to leave their domain unless banished by the Crown—a fate that had befallen a babe one hundred years before: the infant son of the man they were pleased to call the "martyred" Duke of Droon. Their wives could not leave, but their daughters,—if they happened to be cursed with them!—were free to depart in case they married men who chose to avail themselves of the twenty-year provision.

As luck would have it, Gerane was the only girl born to any of the Davoses since the compact was made.

Suspended from rope cables on both sides of the cavern was a considerable assortment of fur garments of every description, all valuable, together with rugs, tapestries and other articles of a like character. Each of these pieces was labeled. One might easily have suspected himself of being in the warehouse of a prosperous dealer in second-hand clothing or the grimy back room of a pawnbroker's establishment. On the long table in the center of the cave was a huge ledger, a pot of ink, several pens and a box of cards to be used as labels. In

this ledger a complete record was kept of each man's possessions. All very businesslike and proper, to quote Julius Broadaxe.

A screen of woven wire, made by Professor Gratz in his capacity as tinker, covered the narrow air slit at the back of the cave. It had been put there many years before following a rather thrilling conflict with five or six enormous vampire bats that had made their way into the cave by means of the windy aperture. "Blood-sucking demons from the pits of hell," is the way Broadaxe catalogued them, and he was one of the men who fought off and finally slew the flapping horrors.

Just inside the entrance and on both sides of it were stacks of rifles, pistols, sabers, lances and all manner of weapons taken from vanquished patrols and escorts. In a separate cave, some distance from the treasure chamber, was stored a quantity of gunpowder, shot and percussion caps.

Jonifer took down several coats from the cable, using a long crotched pole for the purpose. He and Broadaxe spent some time in critical inspection, finally settling upon a long sable garment that had been made in St. Petersburg for an Axphainian nobleman.

"Do you think she will like it?" queried Julius, dubiously. He had fancied black fox.

"She will have to like it," growled Jonifer, running his eye along the line in search of a suitable cap and gloves. From this it could be gathered that Starcourt was to have nothing at all to say about it. "I'm blowed if I'll make another trip up here. If she doesn't like it she can jolly well lump it."

"So you are picking up a few English expressions yourself, eh?"

"Umph!" grunted Jonifer, sourly—but guiltily.

Having chosen what they considered to be a suitable winter outfit for the captive, they prepared to leave the cave. Julius

hung back, pulling nervously at his beard. It was plain to be seen that he had something on his mind.

"Well, what is it?" demanded the chieftain. "Are you coming or—"

"Have you observed the way Peter looks at him, Jonifer?"

"At Starcourt?"

"I dare say he is careful about it when you are around," said the smith. "But when you are not around he looks at him as if he would like nothing better in the world than to slit his gullet! Never have I seen such hate in a man's eyes."

"He is jealous," said the other, unconcerned. "Peter is in love with Gerane."

"No doubt about that," agreed Julius. "But I thought I would speak to you in case you had not noticed. It would not surprise me if we found Starcourt dead sometime with a bullet in his head."

Jonifer shook his head sorrowfully. "Sometimes I think you are turning into an old woman, Julius," said he.

Broadaxe doubled his mighty fist. "No one except my wife is allowed to call me an old woman, Jonifer Davos," he said, threateningly.

"Come, come, Julius. I was jesting."

"I know a jest as well as any one," grumbled the smith; "and I also know an insult. However, I will overlook it. Now, here is something else for you to think about. Gerane herself told me weeks ago that Peter said he would kill Starcourt the next time he met him on the Highway. He said it to her in so many words. What's more, she is uneasy. She is afraid Peter will not wait till they meet on the Highway."

"Ho! Ho! That is good news," exclaimed Jonifer. "That shows how the wind blows. She *is* interested in him."

"Do you think Starcourt ought to be warned?"

"Not at all. I shall warn Peter. That will be all that is necessary. If I make it plain to him that in case Starcourt is

found with a bullet in his head his murderer will be boiled alive in oil within half an hour after the discovery, I think Peter will take the hint. Especially if I give him to understand that he will be the rascal boiled, whether or no. Now, is that all, Julius? Have you anything else on your mind?"

Broadaxe pondered. "Well, it may not amount to much, but Gerane shot a young hawk the other day."

"There's nothing unusual in that, is there? She takes a shot at every hawk that comes within range."

"Aye, but there is a story connected with this one. I have it from Starcourt's own lips. He confesses that he trapped a young hawk a week or so ago and built a cage for it up in the wood. Now here is the point. He wrote out a message on a piece of paper and tied it to the bird's leg. It was a forlorn hope, he admits, but miracles do happen. I leave you to guess what was in the message. He hoped the hawk might some day fly over the mountains and be shot by a farmer who would find the message and take it to Dangloss. Am I making myself plain?"

"Certainly. I am not a half-wit. Get on with it."

"Well, a couple of days ago he went up to set the bird free. Which he did. But it had not flown fifty feet when a shot was fired, startling him almost out of his boots. And him a soldier, too! Well, sir, who should step out from behind a tree but Gerane, gun in hand. The hawk dropped some distance away and she walked over and picked it up. Then she took the paper from its leg and read it, him looking on all the time. He says he will never forget the queer smile she gave him when she finished reading it. Made him feel terribly small, he said. She stuck the paper inside her girdle, tossed the dead hawk toward him and walked away. He says he had too much sense to try to stop her or even speak to her. After she was gone he examined the ground around the cage and found some little footprints in the soft earth. So, he says,

she must have found out about the bird and the letter a little while before he came up and just calmly set herself down and waited for him to show up. Somehow reminds me of a cat playing with a mouse, eh?"

"Well, I'm blowed—I mean damned," ejaculated Jonifer, frowning as he gripped his chin between thumb and forefinger and compressed his lips.

"A cat playing with a mouse," repeated Julius, with a rising inflection.

"She has not mentioned this to me," said Gerane's father, slowly. "She should have brought that— Did you say she kept the letter?"

"How should I know? He says he supposes she took it along with her to show to you. He has been expecting you to put him in chains, or something like that."

"I will have that message out of her this very day or—" began Jonifer.

"Use a little common sense," interrupted Julius, nudging him in the ribs and grinning. "Let her keep it. It can do no harm now, and I have a notion she carries it next to her heart and maybe kisses it every once in—"

"Now, sink me in hell—" roared Jonifer, turning fiercely upon his friend, who drew back in alarm, exclaiming:

"No offense,—no offense, Jonifer. I was only jesting, just as you claim you were a while ago."

"Well, do not jest about my daughter," said Jonifer sternly. "Come along! And spare me any more of your old womanly gossip."

All that evening he sat moodily smoking beside the fireplace and waited for Gerane to speak to him about the message. She sat opposite him, sewing. Matilde, who was mending one of Gerane's frocks, occupied a bench alongside the table a short distance away. They were all strangely untalkative. Jonifer sighed a great many times.

"Sleepy, father?" inquired his daughter, once—and only once. She appeared to be occupied with her own thoughts.

"Not at all," said he dourly.

Above the fireplace hung a three-quarter-length portrait of Gerane's mother, the beautiful Louise. It was done in oil and was sadly in need of cleaning and a reviving coat of varnish. The frame, on which much skill and patience had been expended by the same woodcarver who produced the stools in Gerane's chamber, was of a natural walnut, ungilded, and of the most intricate modeling.

Gerane's resemblance to her mother was startling, although a marked difference was to be noted in the color of the hair and eyes. Louise's hair was flaxen, her eyes a pale, almost grayish blue. The story of this portrait as it was afterwards told to Starcourt by Matilde, may be given here and now.

Some time after the marriage of Jonifer and Louise, the former fell in with a young artist who was spending a few weeks of the waning summer at Digmans' Inn. He was from Vienna; his purpose in coming to the mountains of Graustark was to paint the strikingly picturesque men and women of the region with a view to exhibiting the canvases at the coming winter show in the Austrian capital. He had completed several brilliant studies of young and comely farm and woodland maids when Jonifer made his acquaintance. So entranced and mystified was the young chieftain by these amazing pictures,—especially when he saw how faithfully the artist reproduced the likeness of his subjects,—that he forthwith decided to have Louise's portrait painted.

One day the artist left the inn for a woodman's hut up in the forest, where he had an appointment with a model. He carried his folding easel, paint-box and canvas. He never returned to the inn. Jonifer's men fell upon him. And that was how he came to the valley to paint Louise. Now the strangest feature of the story lies in the fact that not only

had he seen her many times in Vienna, but actually had met her on several occasions. At first he was obdurate and refused to obey the commands of Jonifer. In the end, however, he succumbed. The portrait was the result. He put his heart and soul into its execution, for he fell in love with his subject.

There came a day when he fell upon his knees and tempestuously blurted out his love for her. She was shocked, dismayed. There was but one witness to the scene,—a six-months-old wide-awake baby in a crib: Gerane. Louise spurned him. He snatched up a knife and in a frenzy of despair, rushed over to slash the portrait. With arm upraised, he checked the impulse. For a long time he stood gazing at the beautiful thing he had created—his masterpiece. The knife dropped from his hand. He could not destroy it.

"It is alive," he sobbed. "It lives. God help me, it is a living thing, a beautiful living thing!"

Then he turned on his heel and rushed blindly from the house. Outside the door he met Eljie, the servant. He shouted to her as he passed: "I love your mistress. Now, go and tell her husband, you ——! Tell the damned scoundrel! Tell him I love his wife!" And Eljie told Jonifer. Jonifer went in and looked at the portrait. "It is finished?" he said stonily to Louise. "Yes," she replied, "it is finished, Jonifer." "There is nothing more for him to do to it?" he went on grimly. "Nothing. But, oh, Jonifer, I am sorry for him. Be merciful." That night the painter of the portrait over the fireplace disappeared. He was never seen again. There are men in the valley who could speak of a duel fairly fought in the blacksmith shop of Julius Broadaxe, but up to now not one of those men has spoken. There is a grave somewhere back in the forest that has no headstone.

And now, as he sat beside the fire longingly, and, it should be unnecessary to add, irritably waiting for Gerane to unbosom herself, Jonifer's gaze frequently sought the painted

face of her mother, as if for guidance or inspiration or, more than either of these, some sign to show that she consented to his taking Gerane by the shoulders and giving her a sound shaking. Then he would look furtively at his daughter and shake his head. As serene as a May morning! Nothing to show that she had anything on her mind save the stitches she was taking. And her mother, looking down upon them,—she too was as serene as a May morning. Women were beyond him. You never know when they are thinking and most certainly you never know *what* they are thinking. As for Matilde,—she probably knew about the hawk and the message, but what of it? She also was as serene as a May morning. Women's faces! They all had women's faces. All of them with a million secrets behind them. Like looking at a stone wall. Only Gerane was so enchantingly pretty—

He got up and opened the door to look out into the night. A storm was coming up. There were dull flares of lightning over beyond the peaks and a fierce wind was blowing. Closing the door, he came over and took his stand with his back to the fire. He could hold in no longer.

"Shot any hawks lately, Gerane?" he inquired.

She started, flashing a quick look at him. "Hawks? Why, I—yes, father,—day before yesterday," she replied, and to cover her confusion sucked her forefinger on the pretense that it had been pricked by the needle. She was conscious of the steady gaze he fixed upon her bent head. "Will the storm be upon us soon?" she asked,—very sweetly.

"Sooner than you think," was his ominous answer. "What kind of a hawk was it?"

"Oh, a—a young one. Just a young one."

"And where did you shoot it?"

"Up in the woods, father."

She was smiling up into his eyes now. Sink me in hell, he was saying to himself, she laughs at me!

"I mean in the head or the leg?" he demanded sternly.

"On the wing," she said, mischievously, her dimples deepening.

"Answer my question!" he thundered.

"Haven't I, father?"

"No, you have not. What have you done with the message that was tied to its leg?"

"Oh, now I know what you are talking about," said she, airily. "But I leave it to Matilde if you have asked me that question before."

"I do not leave anything to Matilde. She would back you up no matter what you said. Now, where is it? Produce it at once, my girl."

She sighed. Then she looked up appealingly into his stern eyes.

"Would you be terribly angry if I told you I had destroyed it?" she asked, in a small voice.

"Yes," he said. "Because I would know you were lying. And I have brought you up to always speak the truth. I hate a liar."

"Well, then," said she, "please sit down, father."

"Sit down? And why should I sit down?"

"Because it is impossible for me to sit on your lap while you are standing up."

He hesitated a moment and then sat down, glaring at Matilde, who had her hand over her mouth.

"I hate conspirators," he muttered, darkly.

Gerane came over and sat upon his knees, leaning her shoulder against his breast. He could see nothing but the crown of her head. To save his soul he could not keep his eyes from softening.

"Who told you about it, father?" she asked.

"Now, I do not intend to be questioned about this—"

"Was it Colonel Starcourt? He was the only witness, I am sure."

"I repeat, once and for all, I do not intend—"

"If it wasn't Colonel Starcourt, then who *did* tell you?"

"I will say this much and no more. It was not Starcourt who told me."

"But you are not a mind reader, father."

"Well, then, since you must know, he told Julius Snook," blurted out Jonifer. "Now, where is the paper?"

She reached up and gently scratched his chin. "Don't you love me any more, father?"

"Oh,—now, by the saints in—" His gaze went up to the portrait, as if for help. He put his arm around Gerane. Her body was warm against his heart. "See here," he growled, "if you do not care to show it to me,—why, just say so, and we will speak no more about it. All I want to know is that it is in safe hands."

"I vowed I would never show it to any one, father. It is locked away in the chest with my— But," she broke off to say, submissively, "I can remember every word of it. Shall I tell you what it said?"

Just here it occurred to Jonifer that this was a good time to make a direful announcement. He decided she was in the proper mood for it.

"It is not necessary," he said, hardening his voice. "No harm can come of it now. We have come to the conclusion that we made a mistake in bringing him here. You have no use for him and the good Lord knows the rest of us have none, so this afternoon—yes, and I may add that he swears he would sooner be dead than alive—so this afternoon we decided to get rid of him in the only sensible way we can think of. We are going to shoot him to-morrow at dusk."

He felt her body stiffen. It seemed to him that she stopped breathing. Dead silence followed. He looked at Matilde.

She was staring at him with horror growing in her eyes,—or was it disdain. He waited a moment and was vastly relieved when Gerane relaxed and began to breathe again. So he continued:

"He is a care and a nuisance to everybody. The sooner we get rid of him the better. And as it would be madness to set him free—well, you see how it is, Matilde." He weighed the next sentence carefully. "Dead men tell no tales, as the saying goes."

Gerane surprised him by quietly asking:

"Have you told him of your intentions?"

She was looking at her finger nails—with what appeared to him to be the most serene interest in their condition. He could not believe his ears—or eyes, for that matter.

"We—er—we thought we would not tell him until just before the—the execution. It would be more humane, don't you think so?"

"It is too bad you did not decide on this before you climbed all the way up to the cave to get the furs for him," said she, apparently more concerned for him than for Starcourt. "It would have saved you a great deal of trouble, father dear. I am so sorry I asked you to get them for him. If I had had the slightest idea you were going to shoot him to-morrow, I should never have insisted upon it. But, you see, I was trying to be humane myself. The winters are so cold—"

"Go to bed!" he roared, setting her upon her feet as he arose. "I am going out for a while. I have got to think and God knows I cannot think with you—"

"But, father, listen! The storm is upon us. O-oh! Did you ever hear the wind—"

"Curse me!" gasped Jonifer,—or would it be better to say that he bleated? "Have you no heart? Are you willing to have that poor fellow shot? Are you—"

"I have been brought up to respect your word as law," said

she. "And besides, why should I expect you to regard property rights as sacred?"

"What's that?"

"I merely reminded you that you have no regard for other people's property."

"And what has that to do with this case, may I ask?"

"Isn't he my property?" she asked, coolly, and left the room.

Speechless, he saw the curtains close behind her back. Then he turned to Matilde. She was smiling.

"If I were you, Jonifer," said she, lowering her voice as she came to his side, "I should go ahead with your preparations to shoot him."

He swore between his teeth. "But, curse you, woman, I do not want to shoot him. What is the matter with you women? Have you no—"

"Sit down," she commanded. He obeyed her, much to his own surprise. "You are a great simpleton, Jonifer. Now, listen to me."

And so it came to pass that when Jonifer and six of his men, armed with rifles, appeared at Starcourt's cottage late the next afternoon, they found Gerane standing in the doorway.

"What are you doing here?" exclaimed her father. "Where is he? Stand aside, girl,—"

"He is not here, father," said she, calmly. "I warned him. I told him what was afoot."

"The—the devil you did!" gasped Jonifer. "But, blow me,—curse me, I mean,—he cannot escape. We will chase him down—"

"You will not have far to go, father. He is sitting in the big room over at our house waiting for you to return. Take your guns and go home, all of you. I have decided that I can make some use of him, after all, and as he belongs to me I must ask you to keep your hands off of my property."

The executioners stared, wide-mouthed. An observer would have detected vast relief in their eyes. It was Broadaxe who spoke:

"What use can you possibly make of him?" he demanded, suppressing a chuckle.

"Yes!" boomed Jonifer. "What use can you possibly—"

"I have given him his orders," said she, loftily. "He has his instructions. He is to teach me how to read and speak English this winter. Five or six months will be enough, he thinks. After that I shall probably have no further use for him. So you may shoot him in the Spring if you like."

CHAPTER XI

THE BATTLE OF WITS

Baron Jasto Dangloss, Minister of Police in Edelweiss, returning to his office in the Tower after a visit to the home of Lady Starcourt, found his shrewdest operative, a man named Corpaz, waiting for him in the ante-chamber. The Baron was low-spirited. He had just been through a trying scene with the distracted mother of young Starcourt, whose body had not yet been recovered from the river although well-nigh on to three weeks had elapsed since his disappearance,—three weeks spent in feverishly, diligently, dragging the stream for many miles below the pool in which he was supposed to have met his death. The fact that his body had not come to the surface was proof beyond question that it was held fast by outreaching tree roots, or was wedged in some hidden cleft in the bed of the swirling stream. For many days hundreds of men had been searching the banks and bottom of the river as far south as the mountain range, fifty miles below Edelweiss.

Dangloss dreaded these interviews with Lady Starcourt. To-day had been especially trying. He had been obliged to tell her that on Sunday next the flags at the Tower and the fortress were to be lowered to half-mast and that the Regent had ordered services for the dead to be held in all churches, Christian and Moslem. And she continued to distress him by sticking to the belief that her son was not dead, that some day he would be found alive. The poor Baron could only say that he devoutly hoped so.

"You have something to report, Corpaz," said he. "I can tell by the look in your eye. Have they found it?"

"I come to you, Baron, with nothing more than a suspicion to report. But it is so strong that it might almost be called a conviction. It has nothing to do with Colonel Starcourt. May I be permitted to speak with you alone, sir?"

Dangloss saw that Corpaz was nervous and excited, a most unusual condition for so cool a man as he. He bade him enter the private chamber.

"We are alone here, Corpaz." He looked about at the grim, thick walls and smiled. "If these walls have ears I will eat my own with relish. Sit down. Come to the point. We are not in the habit of wasting words here, as well you know. What is on your mind?"

Corpaz hesitated a moment. "As few words as possible, sir. You and the Jabassys have been friends for some time, have you not?"

"I have known them since they were children. I suppose it is safe to say that we are friends."

"She is a direct descendant of the Duke of Droon, who was put to death for treason?"

"Yes. Why ask that question? You know as well as I."

"Her mother's only source of income was derived from a gratuity set apart for her by the Crown when she was restored, after a fashion, to favor. What was the size of the gratuity?"

"This is most extraordinary, Corpaz,—but if it pleases you I will answer. Three thousand gavvos yearly and the revenue from certain farm lands in the north. Five thousand all told, I should say. Certainly no more than that."

"The gratuity or pension ceased with her death, I understand."

"Yes. Her daughter, Countess Katrane, could not inherit something that was not her mother's to bequeath. The farm lands went back to the Crown, of course. Proceed."

"So then it is quite clear that she has no means of her own.

Well, so much for that. Now, as to Count Jabassy. What are his circumstances? Financially, I mean."

"He has about three thousand a year from his father's estate. It is a matter of record."

"Is he engaged in a profitable business of any kind, Baron?"

"I believe he calls himself a gentleman of leisure," replied Dangloss, humoring his solemn interrogator.

"Then, so far as you know, he has no more than three thousand a year?"

"Approximately. He— But wait! By my soul, I believe I am beginning to see what you are getting at, Corpaz." He leaned forward in his chair, suddenly interested. His keen eyes narrowed

"The Jabassy menage is an expensive one, is it not? Can it be maintained on three thousand a year, Baron Dangloss?"

[Note: The Graustark gavvo, gold, is equivalent to about six dollars in American money.—The Author.]

The Minister of Police smiled and passed his hand over his brow. "You gave me quite a start, Corpaz, I must confess. Three thousand would not begin to cover the expenses of their establishment. Nor twice that amount, I should say. But," and here his smile became sardonic, "I dare say you are aware that Count Jabassy has extensive and usually profitable interests outside the ordinary—er—well, we will say, the ordinary business of being a gentleman of leisure. It is no secret that he is lucky at cards, Corpaz."

"That is his reputation, sir."

"His visits to the Riviera are seldom in vain, I believe," went on the Baron, indulgently. "He usually returns from Monte Carlo and Paris and Biarritz and—well, other health resorts, if I may so describe them,—with more money than he had when he left Edelweiss. He is very successful at the tables. He could, I fancy, maintain three such establishments as the one in Prince Rudovic Street on his winnings."

"The jewels of the Countess are celebrated for their quality and—shall I remind you of their quantity, Baron? She adds to them every year, I am told."

"Quite so. It is lucky for her that he is lucky at cards. Now, what the devil have you got into that stupid head of yours, Corpaz?"

"Something more than stupidity, Baron," replied the other, seriously. "Suppose I were to say to you, in all good faith, that Count Jabassy instead of winning huge sums at Monte Carlo and elsewhere has been a steady loser for the last ten years, at least?"

"First, I should doubt your statement, and secondly I should ask you how you happen to know all this."

"Instead of playing for large stakes, he has risked very little at any of these places. Therefore, it is only fair to say that his losings have been comparatively small. The point I make, sir, is that he has never collected anything like the amounts he professes to have won. We know that he returns from these trips with large sums of money which he claims to have won at the tables. There is no secret, I believe, as to the size of his and the Countess's balances in the Bank of Graustark. They are fairly large. But they also have accounts with banks in Paris, St. Petersburg and, I understand, in London."

"I repeat, how do you happen to know all this, Corpaz?"

"Two months ago I was in Monte Carlo, as you know. I had much business to transact and was aided by Le Blanc, the shrewdest of police detectives. You know him, sir. I happened to mention the Count and Countess Jabassy. He knows them well by sight and reputation. It was he who set me right in regard to their play. He gave me a great surprise, I can tell you. He knows for a fact that they are what he describes as 'small potatoes.' That is their reputation. They play occasionally but never risk more than a few hun-

dred francs. A mere bagatelle, he calls it. And they seldom win. Now, sir, what I should like you to tell me is this: If Count Jabassy does not make these big 'killings' at cards or on the wheel, how can he live as he does and where do the Countess's jewels and wardrobe come from?"

Baron Dangloss was impressed. "If this is true, Corpaz,—and I know you to be a careful, reliable man,—then there is something queer about the business."

"It set me to wondering, sir," went on Corpaz. "On my own initiative,—to satisfy my curiosity, if you like,—I communicated with men I know in Biarritz and Nice. They substantiate Le Blanc's statements. The Jabassys have won little or nothing at those places."

"Hm-m!" mused the Baron, frowning thoughtfully.

Corpaz considered his next remark for some time before venturing. "You have seen the blue diamond she wears on rare occasions, I take it? Perhaps you also remember that five years ago a stone of great size and value,—so large that it was a notable one,—was reported as having been taken, with other things, from a Russian Princess while she was passing through the Inn of the Hawk and Raven. It was—"

"I have seen the stone you mention, Corpaz. Countess Jabassy wears it as a pendant. It has been in her possession less than six months."

"So I am told, sir," said the detective, significantly.

"I judge by your tone, Corpaz, that you consider it not unlikely she may have had the blue diamond for years instead of months."

"It may seem ridiculous, Baron Dangloss, but such a thing is possible,—I will not go so far as to say probable."

"Good God, man, you—you are not intimating that Jabassy and his wife are connected in any way with the robbers of Droon Forest?" said the Baron, lowering his voice almost to a whisper.

Corpaz shrugged his shoulders. "We have had many surprises in our time, sir."

"But, my dear fellow, this is—preposterous."

"The Jabassys have about four thousand between them," mused the other, a meaning smile on his lips. "They live at the rate of ten thousand, at the very lowest. They do not win vast sums by gaming. And we are positive that Jonifer Davos has confederates in this city," he went on, after a moment, hunching forward in his chair. "We know that he possesses the most accurate information concerning the transportation of valuables over the Highway; he knows the movements of worth-while travelers. This information could come only from persons belonging to a class in constant touch with—well, wealth, is the word to use, I suppose. We all believe that some one high up in the social or business world is Davos's agent here. It may even be true, sir, that Davos is the agent and a respected, honored citizen of Edelweiss is his employer. No matter. It should go without saying that the go-between or spy does not work for nothing. Whoever he may be, he receives a share of the spoils. And the spoils are large, Baron Dangloss. Again let me remind you that the rarest single gem ever taken by Jonifer Davos was a blue diamond of such surpassing rarity that lapidaries claim there is not another one like it in the world."

Dangloss regarded his man for some time without speaking. Finally he said:

"You are expecting me to say that I will sleep over this matter, eh, Corpaz?"

The man smiled. "No, sir. I know you too well for that. You are not in the habit of sleeping over such things. I am sorry to say that I fear you are in for a long stretch of absolutely sleepless nights."

"Come in to-morrow morning. I like nothing better than to be able to complain to a sympathetic listener about my in-

somnia. Have you ever been cursed with insomnia, my friend? It is a dreadful affliction."

"Very well, sir. I will be here to-morrow morning—for orders."

And so it was that the fingers of the law began to grope in the dark for something tangible to clutch. It was a slow, sometimes seemingly hopeless process. Corpaz, shrewd and resourceful as he was, could not put one of these fingers on a single spot that was sensitive to the touch; a less dogged, less cocksure, man than he would have confessed himself mistaken and given up the case in disgust. But something told him that he was on the right track, and it was this strange something that kept at his back, pushing all the time and would not listen to him when he attempted to convince his own reason that he was wrong. His mind became a blank to almost everything else; the Jabassys became a physical as well as mental obsession with him. He never saw them without visualizing secret, surreptitious meetings between them and the leader of the robbers; the sight of jewels on the person of the gorgeous Countess had but one significance to him; the liberal spending of money in public places by the Count was evidence of the most tantalizing character that the smug nobleman was Jonifer Davos's henchman.

His investigations were being carried on with the greatest secrecy. No one save Dangloss was aware of his activities, and the Baron, to whom he faithfully reported every detail, was now thoroughly convinced that Jabassy and his wife were engaged in some shady enterprise, if not in conjunction with the Droon Forest robbers then most certainly with another organization of unsavory character. Corpaz's persistent inquiries developed incontrovertible proof that the Count had lied about his successful operations at Monte Carlo and elsewhere. But even so, lamented Corpaz, how was he to discover the source from which these frequent indications of

opulence were derived without actually drawing the information from the gentleman himself?

At last the detective, baffled at all turns but more than ever certain that he was on the right scent, resorted to a daring expedient: that of representing himself to be a messenger from Jonifer Davos himself.

Assuming a disguise that would have deceived his own wife, —if he had had one,—he set about carefully to carry out his plans. They were simple enough, but they called for the greatest skill in execution. Success or temporary failure depended on the outcome of the experiment. Without knowing precisely why, he selected the Countess as the one on whom the test was to be made. Perhaps it was because he knew that while women are infinitely more crafty than men they also are the more easily duped by the plausible.

The Countess Jabassy left her house in Prince Rudovic Street one morning just as a huckster was passing, his two-wheeled cart laden with an assortment of tempting, out-of-season fruits,—pears, grapes, peaches and plums. He brought his cart to a stop, took off his shabby hat and obsequiously petitioned her to buy of his luscious stock.

"I do not care for any to-day," said she, but her eyes glistened a little as they swept the delectable heaps.

He held up a great bunch of purple hot-house grapes.

"From Southern Italy, madame," said he, his white teeth showing in a most engaging, appealing smile.

She was tempted. She paused to examine the contents of his cart.

"They look delicious. Take your cart to the postern gate and summon—"

The strange behavior of the huckster caused her to break off the sentence at that point. He was leaning well across the cart, ostensibly to direct her attention to the stack of pears; and he glanced furtively up and down the street in a most

extraordinary way. Then he spoke to her in a quick, low-pitched tone of voice.

"Madame, I would have a word with you. I am not what I seem. I have come with a message from one you know well."

She stared at him in astonishment.

"Are you speaking to me, my good man?" she inquired, drawing back a little. Was the fellow crazy?

"Pray examine these peaches, madame," said he hastily. "Touch them. They are fresh from Tuscany." Again his voice was lowered: "It is important, madame, that I recite to you by word of mouth the message I am commissioned to deliver."

It was a gambler's chance he took. He watched her closely. The slightest flicker of an eyelid on her part might prove to be of the greatest significance; a fleeting gleam of alarm, interest, encouragement,—any of them,—would have contented him.

"This is most extraordinary," she said, coldly. "You have made a mistake, my man."

Corpaz experienced a sudden exultation; for instead of walking away she continued to inspect the fruit, her head lowered, her fingers busy.

"I have been cautioned about making mistakes, madame," he said, calmly feeling a luscious-looking peach before handing it to her. "You are the Countess Jabassy. I am to deliver a message to either you or the Count. Time is short. I have not been successful in catching the Count alone, so—"

"You are very mysterious—and interesting," said she, lifting her eyes to his. He was aware of a deep, searching look in hers. "If you have a message for my husband or me perhaps you will be good enough to tell me who it is that sends you to us."

"Is it necessary for me to mention names, madame?" in-

quired Corpaz, frowning impatiently. "What more do you require than the statement that if I should make a mistake and speak to the wrong person my life would not be worth a puff of smoke."

A citizen approached, walking briskly. The Countess was examining the grapes as he passed. Needless to say, Corpaz's blood was surging, albeit his sallow, pinched face betrayed not the faintest trace of excitement.

"Where do you live?" demanded the Countess, abruptly.

"I came from Droon Forest," said he, at a chance.

Her eyes narrowed as if she were trying to read what was written on his brain. She was silent for a long time, but not for a second did she take her questioning gaze from the face of the huckster. Inwardly he gloated. The ruse had succeeded. Already her feet were in the trap.

"Droon Forest? I do not know any one in Droon Forest, my man," she said, puckering her brow thoughtfully.

He rubbed an apple vigorously with the palm of his hand, studied its glossy red peel with pride, and said:

"It is a very beautiful wood, madame, but an evil place, just the same. We who abide there know that it is ruled by a man known as Jonifer Davos."

It was a quick thrust. He observed the almost imperceptible dilation of her eyes. His brain worked like lightning. Risking everything, he struck boldly.

"One of Jonifer Davos's men has proved to be a traitor, madame. There was a reward of ten thousand rubles offered for the discovery and return of a certain blue diamond. This man promised to divide the reward with one of his comrades in return for information as to its whereabouts. After his flight this comrade weakened and confessed to his chief. And now, madame, as I see that you do not care to purchase any of my fruits, I will go about my business. Permit me to wish you good—"

"One moment," interrupted the Countess. "I—I have not finished looking at your fruits."

Her sudden pallor rejoiced him. Her eyes were lowered, so he missed seeing what he was sure they revealed: agitation, dismay, even alarm. But he did see the moisture start on her smooth upper lip.

"I would not take too much time, madame, in examining my worthless stock," said he, meaningly.

She made a heroic effort. "Why should I be concerned in the affairs of Jonifer Davos and his—"

He cut her off sharply. "That is for you to decide, Countess. I have performed my duty. There is no more for me to say. Pardon me, if I go about my business."

"If you will take your cart around to the gate—"

"It is not my mission to sell this truck," he interrupted, quite uncivilly. "The most important object I have in life at this moment is to get outside the walls of Edelweiss before it is too late. If Peter should happen to come here to consult the police—"

"Peter?" she gasped. "You do not mean Peter Davos?"

He had used the name Peter at random. It was with difficulty that he suppressed an exclamation of triumph.

"Peter is enough," he said gruffly, as if regretting an unfortunate slip of the tongue.

"But—wait! Have you nothing else to tell me? Surely there must be something more that—"

"My instructions were to speak to you or the Count about the blue diamond and to tell you of a traitor's intention to secure the reward. That is all, my lady." He hesitated a moment and then said, with a most engaging smile: "I am sorry I cannot tempt you with my pears and grapes and peaches to-day."

With that he raised his hat awkwardly and made off up the street in a leisurely fashion, huskily calling his wares.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the tall, elegant Countess turn and hurry up the brick walk and into the Jabassy mansion. It pleased him to observe that her pace was swifter and less dignified than one would have expected in an aristocratic lady well along in the fifties.

The smile of Peter Corpaz was beatific as he hurried along with his cart. For the first time in his life he thanked his stars that his parents had christened him Peter.

While Baron Dangloss was astounded he was not slow to act upon the revelations of his star operative. Within ten minutes after Corpaz concluded his report, half a dozen men were on their way to the Jabassy house, armed with an official warrant summoning the Count and Countess to the Tower for examination.

"There is no doubt about it now, Corpaz," he said to his assistant. "They are in league with Davos. Now to break them down and squeeze the whole truth out of them. By gad, man, do you realize what this means? After all these years we may be on the point of solving the puzzle of—"

"Do not be too sure of that, sir," interrupted Corpaz, uneasily. "We have had experience with members of Davos's band. I could mention eight or ten of them who went to the scaffold or block without squealing. Others have shot themselves when wounded or surrounded. The Jabassys may be of the same timber. You do well, sir, in not losing a moment's time in bringing them here."

"She is a remarkably clever woman, and he is no fool. You may be sure they will defy us. We have very little to go on, you know. Coming down to facts, they have only to keep their mouths closed and we are done. We haven't an atom of real evidence against them. She is smart. Our hope lies in striking while the iron is hot, before they have a chance to steady themselves. Naturally they will be frightened. They will be in a panic. For all they know, the informer is

here with us. They may even conclude that he has revealed the whereabouts of Jonifer Davos and that our men are already on the move to apprehend him. Gad, when I think that it is we who are in the dark and not they, I could— But no, it is not a laughing matter, Corpaz, so I must importune you to forgive me if I keep a straight face."

"I most respectfully forgive you," said Corpaz, drily.

In the meantime Katrane Jabassy had gone straight to her husband's bedchamber. The Count was in the habit of lying abed late. He was, when all is said and done, a true gentleman of leisure. Besides, of late he rather fancied he was on the verge of becoming an invalid. It was his liver, he maintained. His wife said it was his spleen. They frequently had words over the matter. Liver, bawled he,—spleen, snapped she. The servants said wine.

She burst into the room without knocking. He was lying in bed reading a novel, the coffee things on a tabourette at his elbow. She closed the door.

"Get up!" said she, out of breath.

"Go to the devil!" said he, very much annoyed.

She sat down heavily on a chair close by. He noticed that she was pale and trembling. Never before had he seen her pale and trembling. So he laid his book down on the bed.

"Peter Davos has deserted Jonifer," she said hoarsely. "He is after the reward offered by Princess—"

"What's this?" he broke in, getting up with amazing celerity.

She told the story of the strange huckster. He listened with his jaw hanging, an unhealthy pallor gleaming through the sweat that broke out on his face.

"Who was that man, Katrane?" he asked, sucking in his thin lips. He sat on the edge of the bed during her agitated recital, knees together, his hands gripping the mattress. He was a lean, tall man, with a saturnine face, deeply lined, and

his gray hair was tousled. By no means the dandy he invariably was when strolling the streets or sauntering haughtily through crowded restaurants.

"He would not give his name. I do not blame him. I have never seen him before, Emlen; but there is not the slightest doubt that he came from Jonifer. What is to be done? It is serious. We must think and act quickly."

"He mentioned the blue diamond in particular?"

"He spoke of nothing else, I tell you. Do not sit there, gaping," she cried furiously. "If you wish to be finicky about it, Emlen, he did not even go so far as to say that I have it. He said no more than I have told you. But any fool would understand that he knows where it is. It was not necessary for him to tell me that I have it. He—"

"When did Peter leave?"

"My God, man, must I say to you again that he said no more than I have already told you twice? He warned me, that is all."

"I—I wish I could have seen him. I'll wager my soul I would have got all of the facts out of him."

He spoke irascibly as he shuffled over to a cabinet, where he poured himself a drink from a flat brown bottle. She watched him with hard, impatient eyes. The neck of the bottle clattered against the rim of the glass as he poured his drink. She thought of chattering teeth.

"Give me a drink of that, Emlen," she said suddenly. "I need it."

He brought her a glass and the bottle. "Pour it yourself," he mumbled, and then marveled at the steadiness of her hand.

"The first thing to do," said she presently, "is to warn Shenke and Delawar and Mingovard. Are they all in town?"

The Count was frowning. "If I had had the chance to speak to this fellow—why did you not send him to me? Naturally he hesitated about talking to a woman in a—"

"For heaven's sake, Emlen, put on your clothes!" she cried in sudden exasperation. "It is too late to growl about that."

"Perhaps if I hurried out and looked for him I—"

"I asked you about Shenke and the others. Are they in town?"

"They were here yesterday," he grumbled.

"You must see them to-day,—this morning."

"I am lunching with Count Delawar."

"See Shenke and Mingovard first. They must be told without delay. And, Emlen, you and I are leaving for Vienna to-night. Go at once to the railway station and—"

"See here, Katrane," he broke in sternly, "you must pull yourself together." The brandy had put courage into him. "This may not be as bad as it looks. In any case, it isn't likely that Peter will have—"

"What do you know about it?" she snapped. "Isn't it enough that Jonifer got the warning to us as speedily as possible? Why wait? We can catch the Rome express out of Vienna to-morrow. What is the sense of sitting here and waiting for something to happen? It may be that nothing will come of this, but I shall feel more comfortable in Rome, let me tell you, than I do here at this minute. If nothing happens, we can return next month or whenever we choose. But if Dangloss gets word from the Princess that one of Jonifer's men has come to her with—well, we leave here to-night, that is all I have to say."

"Before you do anything else, hide the diamond," cried he, impressed. "While I do not believe that Dangloss is likely to hear anything for several days,—it may be weeks,—still, it is best to be on the safe side. It is possible, too, that Peter may have a change of heart. More than that you can be sure that Jonifer is not idle. He is close on the rascal's heels, I'll warrant, and if he catches him—"

She cut him short. "Do you realize what they will do to

you and me, Emlen, if they prove that we are"—she lowered her voice to a whisper—"that we are associated in any way with the robbers of Droon Forest?" Her face was ghastly. "They will execute us—both of us. If Peter tells them that I am Jonifer's sister—"

"You got me into this," he almost snarled. "I never would have dreamed of mixing myself up in his cursed affairs. I—"

"Stop at the bank and withdraw all the money you can without exciting suspicion," she ordered, paying no heed to him. "Thank heaven, all of our eggs are not in one basket. I will give you credit for that, Emlen."

"Thank you," said he, sarcastically. He was getting into his clothes with nervous, clumsy haste. "If I had listened to you every gavvo we possess would be in the Bank of Graustark or—"

"They have not beheaded a woman since I was a little girl," she muttered, twisting her fingers. Her eyes were glassy again. One moment she was strong and contemptuous, the next weak and terrified. "But I remember hearing my mother tell of three women whose heads were cut off in the Citadel plaza, with thousands of people looking on."

"I remember they were in the plot to assassinate the Prince. Six men and three women. But the law has been changed since then, Katrane," said he, in what was meant to be a comforting tone. "The condemned person nowadays may have his choice between hanging and death on the block."

"How nice of them! A pleasant and happy arrangement," she sneered, pulling herself together. "I am not sure which I should choose if it came to—"

"For God's sake, woman, don't—"

"What fools we are to be talking like this," she broke in, springing to her feet. "Come! Don't dawdle, Emlen. I will put a few things into your traveling bags while you are out, and pack my own boxes. We go to-night without fail—

and we stay away until it is safe to come back. All may turn out well,—and then we can return,—but we must take no chances now. I will go at once and hide the diamond where there is no likelihood of its ever being found unless they pull the house down, brick by brick."

"You would better hide the rubies and—"

"I will attend to all that," she interrupted curtly. At the door she paused. "Come home as soon as you have warned the others. No,—go to the bank and railway office first. Do not dawdle, Emlen. But, on the other hand, don't arouse suspicions by hurrying. No one in Edelweiss has ever seen you hurry. Sight of the stately Count Jabassy trotting instead of strutting would turn the town upside down."

She was gone. A few moments later he strolled into her boudoir, buttoning his gloves. A servant had brought several portmanteaus and valises to the room and had gone off to carry up the trunks. The Countess was engaged in transferring a number of small articles from a table drawer to one of the bags. Her jewelry lay in a heap on the top of this table, the blue diamond pendant gleaming like a small azure flame in the morning sunlight that poured in through the window.

"I am off, my dear," said he, squaring his shoulders.

She had removed her street costume and was in a peignoir of green satin and lace. Her hat and boa and gloves were where she had tossed them, on a chair across the room.

She eyed him scornfully. "In that case, I should advise you to go back to your room and put on a cravat, Emlen, dear."

At this juncture the door leading to the corridor was thrown open and two men in the uniform of the royal police stepped into the room. They appeared as if by magic. There had not been the faintest sound to indicate their presence in the house, much less their approach to the boudoir. The Jabassys were paralyzed, frozen.

"The compliments of Baron Dangloss, my lady, my lord," spoke the first of these corporeal apparitions, displaying a document on which there was a big red seal; "and you are requested to accompany me forthwith to his chambers in the Tower."

Still the Jabassys were motionless, except that their mouths had fallen open. Their eyes were unblinking. The officer's quick alert gaze lighted on the jewels. In an instant the Countess Katrane recovered from her stupefaction. But in doing so, she lost her head completely. With a little cry, she stretched out her hand and fumbled for the convicting blue diamond.

"Wha-what do you want?" she almost screamed.

The Count, true to his class, straightened himself up and haughtily faced the intruders.

"What the devil do you mean, breaking in upon—" he began, with well-assumed indignation.

"We come with a Crown warrant, Count Jabassy," interrupted the officer, sharply but courteously. "My instructions are to escort you and the Countess to the Tower at once. I am also to bring with me such jewelry as may fall under my notice."

"This is an outrage! What does it mean? What the devil does Baron Dangloss mean by—"

"You will have to ask that question of Baron Dangloss, sir. My orders are simple. I am to fetch you to the Tower at once. Will you be kind enough to come with me without further argument?"

The Countess arose. "This is most incomprehensible," she said, with dignity. "Why does not Baron Dangloss come to this house if he desires to see us? He is welcome here. Our door is open to him. What jest is this?"

"It is not a jest, madame."

"Return to Baron Dangloss, then, and assure him that

Count and Countess Jabassy will present themselves at his office within the hour," said the Count, pompously.

The officer shook his head. "I am obliged to inform you, sir, that you are to accompany us, and without delay."

The Countess flared. "Do you mean to say that we are to walk through the streets with—with policemen?" she exclaimed.

"There is a carriage waiting, madame. A carriage for four," he said, with meaning. "I must trouble you to pass all of those jewels over to me. That blue diamond, first of all, madame."

"I—I do not understand," she murmured, as if bewildered.

"Nor I," blustered the Count.

"Come, come!" said the officer, crisply. "If you will be good enough to attire yourself, madame, in—in something else, we will allow you time to do so. Five minutes should be sufficient."

A third policeman entered the room and a fourth was visible beyond the doorway. Not one of these men knew that he was playing a part in a game of bluff, almost grotesque in the very nature of its conception.

"The servants have started, sir," announced the newcomer, touching his cap.

The faces of the Jabassys were livid. The game was up. Dangloss knew everything!

"If you will step into the hall, officer, I will change my dress and be ready to accompany you in a few minutes," said the lady in a scarcely audible tone. Her mind was not on the jewels, nor the police, nor even the present situation. She was thinking only of the block and the headsman's ax. "Go, —if you please. Wait, Emlen! Assist me with my dress."

"The jewels, madame," said the first officer, advancing. She dropped them into his hand, the blue diamond among them.

"Who is—who is responsible for this outrage?" demanded Jabassy, plucking up a little spirit.

"Peter," replied the officer, and spoke the truth. "We will wait in the hall,—with the door open, if you do not mind."

"I do not mind," said Katrane, dully.

A moment later she and her husband were alone. Not a word passed between them as they stood gazing bleakly into each other's eyes. Then she drew herself erect, took up a small reticule from the table and fumbled among the contents. Producing a small phial, she unscrewed the cap and poured several small white tablets into her palm. Jabassy watched her as if fascinated.

"Here!" she said, in a low voice. "It is all over. Our only way out, Emlen. Have you the courage?"

"Yes, Katrane," said he in a whisper. Then he smiled. "You always said these things would come in handy, my dear."

He put his arm around her and together they walked stiffly across the room and sat down upon the couch.

"I do not like the idea of falling," said he, grimly humorous. "We are both rather tall."

"Hush!" she whispered through dry lips.

A few minutes later the impatient police officer strode into the room. The Jabassys were sitting side by side on the couch, but there was something about their attitude that drew a loud cry from the lips of the officer. Their bodies were bowed upward, their heads against the wall,—and they were grinning horribly.

CHAPTER XII

A LESSON IN ENGLISH—AND SOMETHING ELSE

STARCOURT, accepting his status as a menial in the service of Jonifer's daughter, had no complaint to offer when he was told that he would have to eat in the kitchen with Eljie and Rosa, the maidservants. He took it philosophically,—and he was too much of a thoroughbred to let the two women suspect that he resented his lot. He did not sulk or glower; nor, on the other hand, was he guilty of treating the situation with undue levity. If Gerane expected him to go about in lofty disgust, she was soon to find herself mistaken.

He did not behave at all according to her preconceived notions of what a nobleman and an officer in the army would be most likely to do under such humiliating circumstances. She was very wrathful about it. And for that reason she took a mean, spiteful delight in subjecting him to all manner of small indignities, hoping down in her soul that he would turn upon her as any man of spirit should! The perversity of women! Especially the perversity of women in love. For Gerane was miserably in love and did not know what to do about it.

But he, confound him (lamented she), was as mild and respectful and dutiful as the most exacting of mistresses could demand. He was always courteous, unruffled,—even tolerant, which was the worst of all,—no matter how cavalierly she treated him, and in spite of anything she could do to rouse his ire.

Her father protested against Starcourt's eating in the kitchen.

"He is a gentleman, Gerane," he expostulated at the end of the first week. "If he is good enough to sit at the same table with lords and ladies, he certainly is good enough to sit at ours. What the devil has got into you?"

"He is a servant, father. I do not believe the lords and ladies you speak of are in the habit of having their servants eat at the same table with them."

"Well, when it comes to that, what is Matilde but a servant? She has always had her meals with us."

"She was my mother's companion. The cases are not similar."

"But she is a—a sort of lady's maid to you. Isn't an instructor in English entitled to as much consideration as a lady's maid?"

"Starcourt appears to be satisfied with his treatment," said she, as if dismissing the subject.

"Starcourt?" he echoed. "Now, there is another point, my girl. Yesterday I heard you address him as 'Starcourt'! Not Colonel or Mister Starcourt. Just 'Starcourt.' I should think you would be ashamed to—"

"He proposed it himself, father, if you must know. In England, he says, all servants are called by their surnames. No one ever thinks of calling his butler Charles Augustus. He simply calls him Smith. And lady's maids, parlor maids, upstairs maids and so on are always addressed as Evans, O'Brien or Hughes, never as Jennie or Minnie or Priscilla. If you see what I mean, jolly well. He insists that it is altogether proper to call him Starcourt."

"Humph! Be that as it may, I do not like it, Gerane. Why is it, then, that you do not call Eljie and Rosa by their surnames?"

Her eyes twinkled. Then she put her hand over her mouth to repress a perfectly justifiable giggle. "Isn't that funny?

I don't even know their last names—and I doubt very much whether they themselves remember them."

Jonifer cleared his throat. "Ahem! It does not matter. But I hardly think it sounds proper for you to speak to him as 'Starcourt' when I always address him as 'Colonel' and he has taken to calling me 'Jonifer.' And, now that we are on the subject, what must he think of an arrangement that permits him to sit here in this room nearly every night and drink a bottle of wine with me, smoke a pipe or two and chat for an hour or so as free and easy as you please, and yet compels him to eat his meals in the kitchen with those two wenches? It is not consistent, my dear."

"You forget that I never remain in the room while this is going on, father," said she, stiffly.

"I find him exceedingly good company."

"Indeed? I am sorry to spoil your evenings, father, but I have decided to work a little harder at my English. Beginning to-night we shall have lessons from eight to ten o'clock."

Jonifer scowled. "What's this? Are you making a slave of him?"

She raised her eyebrows slightly. A wave of color spread over her cheeks. "Don't be absurd, father. He suggested it himself."

"Oho!" exclaimed Jonifer, with a smile. "He did, eh? Then he must look upon you as a dull pupil."

"He says it is very difficult to teach without text books," she explained. "Under the circumstances, he regards me as a very apt pupil."

"You had little or no trouble learning French and German from Matilde. She had no text books that I know of."

"English is much more complicated," said she, patiently. "Don't you think so, father?" She asked this quickly. "You speak a little English yourself. Did you not have trouble with—"

"My dear child, I speak a little of everything. You forget that your grandfather was born in France, went to college in Germany, lived for years in Russia and Greece and spent some time in London. He was versed in all these languages and I picked up a little of each from him. But he was well along in years before he began to learn the language of Graustark, —his own tongue, you might say. I could speak it more fluently at six than he could at forty. But he was obliged to learn it because he had come to Graustark to live. May I presume to inquire just what your object is in learning English, my dear? Are you thinking of going to England to live?"

She regarded him for a moment with great disfavor. "I am doing it merely to kill time," she replied, rather tartly. "Starcourt asked me that very same question a few days ago, and was squelched. I informed him,—as I now inform you, father,—that I expect to live here till I die, after which important event I shall go straight to hell."

"Humph! You think that squelched him?"

"Stop grinning!" she cried furiously, and left him in high dudgeon.

One night, a week or so later, she disconsolately—and very meekly for her—laid down the pen and pushed the paper away from her, leaned her elbows on the table and said to Starcourt:

"I am so stupid, Colonel Starcourt."

"Starcourt, if you please," he reminded her.

She shook her head slowly and there was a curious, shamed look in her eyes. "It is no use. I cannot keep it up. I—I cannot call you just 'Starcourt.' Who am I to speak to you as if you were the lowliest servant? Why should I—"

"I am your vassal," said he, smiling inwardly.

"It is mere play-acting, sir," she said, rather pathetically. "You are Lord Starcourt and I am—nobody."

"Well," said he, smiling openly, "that remark certainly justifies your statement that you are stupid."

"What do you mean by that, sir?" she demanded, quick to resent.

"You are very stupid when you claim to be nobody, Miss Davos."

"Oh, I see. I thought you—" She flushed. "But what I mean is that I am so frightfully stupid about the—the lessons. I cannot seem to learn, and, heaven knows, I have tried hard enough to remember—"

"I am afraid you do not put your mind to it," said he.

"But indeed I do," protested she. "What else do we talk *about* except these wretched English words and what they mean in my own language?"

"That is just the trouble," said he, coolly. "We talk about them but we do not think about them. I submit we would get on a great deal better if we talked about something else once in a while. I know of nothing so uninteresting as the English language when taken in small doses. I teach you to say 'cat' and 'dog' and 'how do you do' and all such things. We work by the hour over sentences like 'the top of the morning to you, sir, or ma'am,' and 'the weather is very fine to-day, is it not?' and 'I am so much obliged to you'—and so on. Now, I think you would get on much faster and the lessons wouldn't be at all irksome if you were to learn to say something like this in English: 'Please light your pipe and smoke, old top,' or 'Shall we cut the beastly old lessons for to-night and go out and look at the stars?' I am sure you would learn a lot of useful English in no time at all. Now, try it. Begin with 'Please light'—say that, please."

" 'Please light—' "

" 'Your pipe and smoke,—' "

She repeated it, her eyes sparkling. ("Lord, how charming she is when she's like this!")

" 'Old top,' " concluded he.

"What does 'old top' mean, Colonel Starcourt?" she inquired, dubiously.

"Well, in this case, it means 'poor fellow.' "

"Do you want to smoke?"

"I do, with your permission."

"Very well, then, old top."

"That is very kind of you."

In silence she watched him fill his pipe—very slowly and deliberately—and light it with a faggot pulled from the fireplace. Her brow was slightly puckered.

"Shall I have Rosa fetch some wine, old top?"

He started. This was picking up English with a vengeance.

"Thank you, no. I am quite content." He leaned back in the chair and crossed his outstretched feet. "This is something like it!"

Her heart was palpitating—gloriously, it seemed to her. Nevertheless, she made a valiant effort to harden it. This would never do! He was getting out of hand.

"I am permitting this only because I am tired," said she, stiffening. "It is not to happen again. Please remember that, Colonel Starcourt."

"I shall never smoke in your presence without first obtaining your permission, Miss Davos," he promised her. "But now let me see how well you remember the sentence. Try it again. 'Please light'—go on now with the rest of it."

But she was gazing soberly into the fire. Was it the light from the burning logs that put the crimson glow upon her face? He watched her out of the corner of his eye, and suddenly a wave of pity for her swept over him. What chance had she ever had in life? What was ahead of her? This lovely, sensitive, high-spirited daughter of Jonifer the Hawk, —what was there in life for her to look forward to? Marriage with one of these rapscallions? Good Lord, what a

doom! That is what it amounted to: Doom. She was as far above these people, as far above her present condition of life, as the stars are above the earth.

His gaze went to the fine, patrician face of the mother above the fireplace, and then quickly back to the exquisite profile of the daughter, whose troubled, thoughtful eyes were fixed on the sputtering flames. Were they talking to her? What was in her mind? What somber picture was taking shape in her thoughts? What was in the warm, throbbing heart of her? Her soft, wavy brown hair; the small shapely ear (he had always thought of ears as hideous excrescences); the firm, yet delicate curve of her chin and the smooth velvet of her cheek, tinged by wind and sun that must have caressed her lovingly; and the long, dark eyelashes that— A great tenderness welled up within him.

For a few seconds he actually was afraid he could not control the incredible impulse that gallantly urged him to take her in his arms and proclaim himself her protector against all that she was dreading, now, henceforth and forever. He wanted to tell her that he would take care of her, guard her, comfort her, protect her from all men! And all this notwithstanding the cavalier way in which she treated him, the indignities she went out of her way to heap upon him, and the undisguised ill-feeling she bore toward him. He could only think of her as a plucky, harassed little warrior fighting with her back to the wall.

There is no telling what he might have said or done under the stress of this bewildering urge, had she not lifted her eyes to his and spoke with a dignity and composure that checked him. He knew that it was on the tip of his tongue to blurt out, from the fullness of his heart: "Don't be afraid, Gerane. They sha'n't harm you, damn them! Not while I am alive. You may count on me, dear. I will—"

"Colonel Starcourt," she began,—there was no arrogance in her voice, no battle in her eyes—"I want to tell you how ashamed I am of the way I have treated you. You ought to despise me. Perhaps you do."

"On the contrary, Miss Davos, I—"

She held up her hand, checking him. "Please do not interrupt," she said,—and he had the uncomfortable feeling of one being politely reprimanded. "It is not an easy thing for me to do," she went on. "I mean, it is not easy to confess that I have been horrid to you simply because I did not want you to see or to feel that I like you. I did not want—"

"You do like me?" he cried, leaning forward eagerly. The pipe slipped from his fingers.

"Yes, I do," said she frankly, meeting his look with unwavering eyes. "I liked you that morning on the Highway, a year ago, and, no matter how beastly I have been to you since you came here, it is not because I dislike you. I must be honest with you,—and myself. There is something cruel about me, I suppose. I wanted to hurt you. I don't know why I should want to hurt you. You are not to blame for what has happened. You are here against your will. But I *did* want to hurt you, Colonel Starcourt. I did everything I could think of to humiliate you and— Oh, what a contemptible fool I have been! But— Please do not interrupt me! But you have made me feel so ashamed, so small and mean. You have accepted everything without a word. You have endured without a single complaint what I—"

"Now, my dear Miss Davos, I must insist on—"

"So now I want to do something I have been trying to do for a week and couldn't. I want to apologize, Colonel Starcourt." Suddenly she had begun to speak rapidly, the words tumbling over each other as if driven by panic.

He caught the abashed, confused flicker in her eyes before

she could turn them away. Plucky little beggar! It had not been easy to do. He weighed his words before speaking, overcoming the temptation to say what he knew full well would be the wrong thing—and yet how he longed to say it!

"I have been very unhappy, Miss Davos," he said gently. "Perhaps I may never know real happiness again, but when I tell you that not all of my despair has been occasioned by imprisonment here you will understand how greatly it has been lessened by what you have just said. You have made me unhappy. It makes me happier than I have been for weeks to hear you say that you derive no pleasure from torturing me."

She gave him a startled, perplexed look. "I—I do not quite understand you," she said.

"Well, you *were* torturing me, you know," said he, whimsically. "You were sticking pins into me all the time,—and they hurt me a great deal more than you thought, if that is any satisfaction to you."

She stiffened. "Colonel Starcourt, I have apologized to you. I have said I am sorry and ashamed of myself. It is your turn to apologize to me, sir."

He was surprised, disconcerted. No silly, simpering girl, this! He had the grace to blush.

"I do apologize, Miss Davos," said he, rising. "I had no idea I was being ungracious. Please forgive me."

She smiled uncertainly, crinkling her brow. "I fear I am over-sensitive," she said. "I thought you were being sarcastic."

"Sarcasm is not one of my accomplishments. But are we to be friends from now on?"

He held out his hand. She hesitated for a moment and then extended hers, palm downward. Again he was surprised but took the long, slim fingers in his and raised them to his lips. It was a quite unstudied, far from gauche, act on her part. She did it gracefully, almost as languidly as any duchess in the land. He was not then by way of knowing that her hand

had been kissed by gallant subjects ever since she was old enough to remember. The robbers of Droon Forest were, in their way, a jovial lot of courtiers.

"I promise to treat you differently," said she coolly. "And now, if you please, I think we would better resume our work. I feel better since I have unburdened myself. Besides, father will be coming home from Julius Broadaxe's before long and I'd rather he did not catch us wasting our time like this."

"Wasting our time? Well, upon my word!"

She turned around and faced the table, gathering up pen and paper.

"Come, come, sir!" she ordered sharply, and for the life of him he could not tell whether she was in jest or earnest. "You are not to think that because I have humbled myself before Colonel Starcourt that I intend to grant any special privileges to my tutor."

"In other words, I am still your vassal?"

"Shall we begin where we left off?" she inquired serenely, bending her head over the paper. "You have allowed your pipe to go out. There it is, on the floor. Now, then: 'Please light—your—pipe—' how does it go?"

"'And smoke,'" he supplied, rather gruffly, receiving the pipe.

"'And—smoke,'" she echoed the English words, frowning as she wrote them down. "'Old top!' There, I have it right, haven't I?" She asked the question in the Graustarkian language and immediately repeated it in French and German. "I am not such a frightful dunce, now am I?" she cried eagerly, looking up.

Starcourt's hand shook a little as he applied a spill of twisted paper to the bowl of his pipe. His heart was behaving in a most unruly manner, beating as it never had before,—as if, indeed, it was trying its level best to break away and go rioting all over his body.

"You—you are not a dunce," said he, lamely. Then he turned away and began to harass the fire vigorously with the long iron poker. He had to do something or—well, make a complete fool of himself. If she continued to be like this, if she kept on looking at him like—

"Are you cold, Colonel Starcourt?" she inquired, solicitously.

"I—not at all," he replied, without facing her. "It just occurred to me that Jonifer will be cold when he comes in, so I thought I would—"

"Oh, dear me! I forgot all about father. It is terribly cold outside, isn't it? Just listen to the wind."

"I hadn't noticed it before," he mumbled.

The next he knew she was standing beside him,—giving orders!

"Put on a couple of logs,—those big ones. O-oh! It makes me shiver when the wind howls like that. Doesn't it make you shiver?"

He picked up one of the fire-logs. "Something makes me shiver," he acknowledged, thickly.

She was wielding the poker now. "See the sparks fly! Ha! I love playing with fire."

He glanced at her sharply. "There might easily be two meanings to that," he said, breathing hard.

"Two meanings?" she queried, her brow puckering in honest perplexity. "How can poking a fire have two meanings?"

"Oh—er—poking it! Ha-ha!" He laughed rather too loudly.

"Are there two ways of poking a fire?"

"See here," he began, straightening up, "are you making sport of— No, I can see you are not. You simply meant—poking it. But you said 'playing' with it, you know."

"Oh, goodness!" She gasped in consternation and went crimson. Playing with fire! Of course she knew what that

meant. Consequences! "Oh, but I—I never play with fire in—in that way, Colonel Starcourt. Truly, I mean it. I—" Suddenly she became very angry. It was like thunder from a perfectly clear sky. Her figure straightened, her chin went up, her eyes blazed. He drew back in dismay. "Do you think I am a fool? How dare you think I am a fool? Answer me at once! No,—do not answer! I will not listen to another—"

"Oh, my dear little Gerane!" he cried, impulsively.

"—to another word you—" she went on, and suddenly stopped, the words dying on her lips.

"My dear, dear Gerane! You must not be angry with me. For heaven's sake, why should I think you are a fool?"

And just as quickly as she had flared into fury she melted into graciousness. That was the way with her,—tempest and sunshine, sunshine and tempest,—and, when all is said and done, that was the charm of her.

She caught her breath and smiled a bit wonderingly. Had she heard aright? Had he said "my dear little Gerane"?

"Oh, I—I wish some one would beat me!" she cried, penitently. "If some one would only beat me when I fly into these silly, unpardonable tantrums, it would do me—"

"Shall I beat you?" he half-whispered, drawing near, his head bent.

At that she took alarm, incontinently retreating to the table, where she struggled to conceal her agitation and a certain delicious though inexplicable terror by fumbling among the scattered pages. He remained where he was for a long time, studying her bent head, the curve of her neck, the graceful back and shoulders, and a slow smile formed on his lips.

"My dear little Gerane!" he said—but strictly to himself!

"Shall we get on with the lesson, Colonel Starcourt?" she said at last, turning to him.

"If you wish, Miss Davos," said he, bowing.

Half an hour later they heard Jonifer whistling as he

came up from the road. She laid down the pen and leaned back with a sigh.

"We have done quite enough for to-night, Colonel Starcourt," she said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Yes," said he. "You have done so much to-night, Miss Davos, that while it isn't literally true, we can both say 'here endeth the first lesson!' "

The door opened, admitting a great blast of cold air and Jonifer Davos. He shot a glance at the young couple as he latched the door.

"Whew! It's turning cold," he exclaimed. "There is winter in the air to-night, Colonel. Well ahead of time, too. And winter here is not a pleasant thing to contemplate."

" 'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious by—' Oh, I forgot; you are not up on Shakespeare, Jonifer. A line from one of his plays."

"I know the line well," said Jonifer. "But I miss the young man from York." He threw his hat and cape on the chair and walked over to the fire. "Well, Gerane, how did the lesson go?"

For answer she took one of his pipes from the deep niche in the chimney wall and held it out to him, saying in her very best English:

"Please light—your pipe and smoke, old top."

Jonifer was puzzled. He understood only part of what she said, and that did not include "old top." She was smiling,—the first time he had seen her smile, except perfunctorily, in Starcourt's presence; and the dragoon was grinning broadly.

"You are progressing, my dear," he said, "but, blow me, if I know what you mean by 'old top.' "

"It means 'poor fellow.' "

"But I am not a poor fellow," he began.

"Oh, yes, you are, father dear. You have the most hate-

ful, disagreeable person in the world for a daughter. So you are most decidedly an 'old top.'"

Starcourt laughed outright.

"Bless my soul!" cried Jonifer, blinking. "What's this? Sink me, you two seem to have progressed considerably in something besides English."

"I am learning good manners, father," said she, after a moment. She was at her door when she turned to say: "Henceforth, Colonel Starcourt will do us the honor of sitting at our board. He will smoke his pipe here and drink wine from our goblets and—and play with our fire"—and here a mocking, challenging gleam leaped into her eyes, "to his heart's content. Good night, Colonel Starcourt. Good night, father."

The former placed his hand on his heart as he bowed low. He was aware that it was pounding heavily. Jonifer was still staring when the heavy curtains fell into place behind her. Now he looked at Starcourt and said, with a twinkle in his eye:

"It seems to me the weather has taken a decided turn for the better. Not nearly as frigid as it was a couple of hours ago, Colonel."

"It *has* warmed up quite a bit," said Starcourt, his eyes still on the quivering curtains.

Jonifer sighed. His gaze lifted to the portrait of Gerane's mother and instantly became serious, even wistful.

"I suppose we would get mighty tired of them if they kept at the same temperature all the time," he mused aloud.

"Are you speaking of the weather, Jonifer?" inquired Starcourt, joining him at the fireside.

"No," said the brigand chieftain; "I am speaking of women."

"Gerane can be like the gentlest, softest of breezes when she chooses," said Starcourt, his thoughts elsewhere; "and like a blast from the Arctic Circle when you least expect it."

"That's why I always claim that women are not made to be

understood. But, Starcourt," he went on suddenly, almost threateningly, "she is the best girl in the world. She's as proud as Lucifer and as warm-hearted as—as—I cannot think of a word, but I mean what I say. So let me give you fair warning, Starcourt. If you—if you trifle with her, I will cut your heart out and feed it to the dogs."

"Trifle with her?" cried Starcourt, hotly. "Why, damn you, Davos, if there's going to be any trifling done it will be the other way about."

Whereupon Jonifer, not in the least offended, invited his captive to sit down and smoke a pipe with him. And, with huge enjoyment, he related the story of Gerane's first and only adventure on the King's Highway, laying particular stress upon her dauntless ride through the great black forest, with peril on every hand. Starcourt's eyes glistened.

"And then," concluded Jonifer, "when she refused to accept the booty as a birthday gift, you could have knocked the whole pack of us over with a feather plucked from the wing of a humming-bird."

"It is very plain to be seen," said the listener, "that she has an aversion to birthday presents."

Jonifer blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that, Colonel. She was tickled almost to death when Jahn Crispo gave her a little pig for her birthday two years ago. But then," he added dolefully, "I will have to admit that it hadn't been stolen."

Starcourt was a long time in going to sleep that night. He kept the lantern burning in his cabin until well toward morning and he smoked many pipefuls of tobacco. Frequently he paused in his pacing to study the features of the late Duke of Droon as he looked down at him from his crude frame on the wall,—a proud, arrogant face it was despite all the havoc that time and ill-use had played with the canvas on which it was painted,—and at such times he drew a ghastly picture of

his own: the head of this far-off ancestor of Gerane's lying in the bloody sand at the base of the executioner's block. There was a vague, haunting something about the upper part of the face of the young duke that made him think of Gerane, and yet they were as different as two people could possibly be. And now, to-night for the first time, he caught the something that was like Gerane and had baffled him for weeks; it was the way in which the dark, singularly alive eyes of the duke looked straight into his and demanded homage.

The room was cold. From time to time he warmed his hands over the charcoal brazier that gave forth but little heat. A high, fierce wind whistled around the corner of the cabin, rattled the door in its sash and hurled fusillades of dead leaves against the window pane. Bed was the place for him,—he could be warm and comfortable there,—but he knew there was no such thing as repose for him to-night, mentally or physically. He was in a state of torment. Over and over again, he demanded of himself, more in exasperation than in wonder if the truth must be told:

"Am I in love with her? Can it be possible that I am in love with this robber's daughter? Am I bewitched? Has she cast a spell over me? Can I throw it off? And, damn me, will she bring me to heel and then laugh at me?"

Or he would cry inwardly: "She is as good as gold. She's clean-minded, she's clean-hearted. Lord, how proud she is! How she fights to keep me from seeing that she is the warmest-hearted, gentlest—why, there isn't a mean drop of blood in her dear body."

At length: "Now, suppose I am in love with her,—Lord, I hope I'm not, I hope I've only lost my head for a little while, as any other fool might do,—but suppose I am actually in love with her, what then? Have I any reason to believe that she will ever care for me in the same way? And yet sometimes I fancy she—" and so on through the long cold night

with this ever-recurring question breaking in upon his reflections to harass him: "Is she sleeping peacefully while I am rampaging around like a silly ass?" He was mean enough to hope she wasn't.

(In passing: Gerane fell asleep five minutes after her head touched the pillow and there was a smile on her lips.)

Starcourt crawled into bed at last and finally went to sleep. He was early abroad, however. They had breakfast at Jonifer's shortly after seven o'clock. It was a bleak, drab morning; the peaks were lost in low-lying, gray clouds driven along by a shrill, harsh wind. The feel of snow was in the air. From a score of scattered chimneys smoke issued lazily, only to be caught up instantly by the gale and sent scurrying away as if trying to escape the cruelty of an adversary swinging vicious lashes.

He was at the kitchen door when Matilde emerged from the main house and called to him.

"Not the kitchen this morning, Colonel Starcourt," she said as he came up. "Jonifer told Eljie that you are to have breakfast in the big room." She closed the door behind them and continued: "You and I will eat alone. Jonifer was off before daybreak to see Heber Dykas, who was badly injured late in the night when a tree was blown down upon his house. I have not heard the details."

He expressed concern for Dykas and then inquired, a note of anxiety in his voice:

"Isn't Miss Gerane—er—feeling well?"

"Oh, yes. But she never gets up to breakfast as early as this. She is a dreadful sleepy-head. I peeked in a while ago and she was sleeping like a baby. Isn't it wonderful to have nothing on your mind and be able to sleep like that?"

He said it was wonderful to have nothing on one's mind. The light from the window fell on his face as he sat down opposite her at the table.

"You do not look as though you slept well last night, Colonel Starcourt," she said suddenly.

"I slept very badly," he said. "You would hardly expect me to sleep well under the circumstances, Miss Matilde," he made haste to explain. "I am afraid it will take a long time for me to get used to captivity."

She leaned forward. "Colonel Starcourt," she said, lowering her voice after a glance toward Gerane's door, "I have been a prisoner in this valley for nearly a quarter of a century and even now I am not used to what you call captivity."

"I— But I thought you loved it here. You—you seem contented and cheerful," he stammered.

"I love Gerane. If it were not for her I should have made my escape long, long ago."

"Your escape? Good heavens, if you know of a way to get out of this place—"

"There is no way to get out of this valley," said she calmly. "But there is a way to escape, my friend."

"You mean?"

"Yes,—it is the only way. The reason I have not killed myself, Colonel Starcourt, is—Gerane."

"Such love and devotion as yours—" he began, but she cut him short.

"You too may have to stay in this valley for the rest of your life,—who can tell? And the reason you will not kill yourself to escape the place is the same as mine,—Gerane."

"Upon my word, Matilde," he exclaimed, in some heat. "Why, if the slightest chance of escape offered itself I would fight my way out to-morrow, next day,—next year,—any time. You—"

"My friend, let me remind you that I merely told you the reason why you will not escape by *killing* yourself."

"I would not kill myself under any circumstances," said he, stiffly.

Rosa came into the room with platters of meat and cakes. Matilde did not speak until the woman retired.

"For more than twenty-three years, Colonel Starcourt, I have not put foot outside of this valley. In all that time my vision has not reached beyond those everlasting, terrible peaks out there. I belonged to the world outside. I was a part of it. Somewhere out in the world beyond those hills are people who loved me. They do not know whether I am dead or alive. I speak of my father, my sisters and my brother. My mother died when I was a child. Perhaps my father has gone to join her. Who knows? Certainly I do not. Now, try, if you can, to picture yourself as existing here for twenty years, knowing nothing of what has befallen your loved ones, —your mother, your sisters, if you have any, your friends,— yes, perhaps your sweetheart. It may seem incredible to you, sir,—but I had a sweetheart long ago. Would you go on living as I have lived unless there was something more for you to think about than yourself? I fancy not, my friend. For the past sixteen years Gerane has stood between me and— escape. And so, my friend, she will keep you from escaping by the easiest and simplest way open to the hopeless."

"Gerane," he murmured, huskily. His gaze went to the curtained doorway.

"Do you use sugar in your coffee, Colonel?" she inquired, quietly. "You see, this is the first time I have had the pleasure of breakfasting with you. I do not know your habits." She was smiling.

"Thanks,—one spoonful, please. You—er—you were speaking of Gerane and me. What makes you think—I mean why do you suggest her as a reason for my—er—reluctance to escape in the way you mention?"

"I leave that question for you to answer yourself, Colonel Starcourt," she replied. "You complain of captivity, sir. For shame! You are a soldier. It is part of the risk you take.

If you fall on the field of battle, that is part of the game of war you play. If you are captured by the enemy, that also is in the game. But how about women who fall into captivity? Women who are not in the game you play and never can be. You are a man, a fighter, a gambler with death. But how about us? Ah, if you could have seen Gerane's mother, if you could have known her! She was the loveliest, proudest girl in all—" She stopped short.

"Tell me about Gerane's mother," he urged.

"Would you be interested?" after a moment's hesitation.

"I can't tell you how much, Matilde," said he earnestly, leaning forward.

So Matilde related the story of Louise, and not for an instant did Gavan Starcourt suspect that she took a deep,—aye, a fierce interest in letting him know who and what the mother of Gerane was in the golden days before she fell into the hands of the robbers of Droon.

Louise was the eldest daughter of a rich and influential baron whose vast belongings included a castle in the Tyrol, a mansion in the city of Vienna and far-reaching farm lands in the south of Austria, estates coming down to him in his generation from the feudal barons who built and throve before his birth and who had won and lost and won again in the wars of conquest and defeat that made the land a bloody battle ground for years upon years of greed and misery. Her father was Baron Johann Hazenstahl; her mother was the daughter of a titled Viennese surgeon of great renown. She had an elder brother and two sisters younger than herself. The former must have been the head of the family by this time, as Baron Johann was well along in years when his daughter was kidnaped.

"I know nothing of what has happened at Hazenstahl or in Vienna since the day Louise and I left Edelweiss on our way to the railroad in Axphain. We had spent a fortnight at the

house of Count Marlanx in Edelweiss and were on our way to Prague, where Louise had relatives and school friends. I need not tell you that she was received at the Court of Graustark and that many entertainments were arranged in her honor by the nobility. Your mother would remember her visit if she happened to be in Edelweiss at the time."

"I dare say my mother was living in England at that time," interjected Starcourt.

"I was her companion," went on Matilde, disregarding the interruption. "She was twenty-one years old. That portrait does not do her justice. She was very beautiful, Colonel Starcourt, and greatly beloved. But we need not go into that. It is too painful. A lordly company attended us part of the way over the King's Highway,—gay, eager, young gallants who had lost their hearts to her in Edelweiss. They left us on the morning of the second day and we went forward with the escort provided by Count Marlanx, who was then Minister of War. There were ten soldiers, besides our own servants and the postilions. That night the robbers swept down upon us. The soldiers tried to beat them off. Every man in our escort was killed, Colonel Starcourt. Two days later we came to this valley as captives. Gerane's grandfather was the chieftain of the band. He was a tyrant. The only thing I shall ever be grateful to Jonifer for was his defiance of his father when that beast would have— But I must leave something to your imagination. There is good in Jonifer, Colonel Starcourt. He is ruthless, he has killed men, he has ruled here with a hand of iron. But he loved Louise as no woman was ever loved by man. He loves her still. And she came to love him, robber though he was. After all, he is the descendant of a royal duke. There is a long stream of good blood flowing back from him through the ages— But your coffee is cold, Colonel Starcourt. Let me pour you a fresh cup."

"Thank you. Stupid of me. Yes, one spoonful, please.

When I was a little boy my father and mother talked a great deal about the horrible fate of the poor young Austrian girl, and even to this day, Matilde, the crime is discussed at the Tower. It will cause a great sensation when the facts become known."

"If they ever do," said she, sententiously. "I wonder what the world would say if it ever came to know that the lineal descendant of a royal duke, a daughter of the ill-fated Louise, and cousin to the noble house of Hazenstahl was born and brought up in a nest of thieves and cutthroats. I wonder."

CHAPTER XIII

COUNSEL FROM ALL SIDES

Snow fell before the news of the death of Jonifer's sister and her husband reached the valley. Even more disturbing was the report that Baron Dangloss had found out the truth about them and had ordered their arrest, a calamity happily averted by the joint suicide but which may not have occurred before one or the other of the couple had been forced to betray the location of and means of access to the secret valley.

Jonifer and his half dozen counselors were uneasy until it was learned later on through the Digmans that the Jabassys had made way with themselves, greatly to the chagrin of the authorities, without even confessing their own duplicity, much less exposing the hiding place of the robbers. From all accounts, Dangloss was as much in the dark as ever. A spy, sent down to the city some time afterwards, brought back the word that three well-known noblemen had left Edelweiss for trips abroad, and were not expected to return before the following spring. Inasmuch as the three gentlemen were bachelors well along in years and annually in need of a thorough renovation at one of the cures for high-living, scant attention was paid to their departure by the newspapers. But Jonifer and his men wondered whether Dangloss knew something that the Press did not. Time alone would tell. Meanwhile preparations for defending the gap against a possible invasion by troops were hastily perfected.

No effort was made to keep the news from Starcourt. That he was dumbfounded goes without saying. He found it hard to believe that the Jabassys were in league with the robbers

and had been for many years. He greatly admired the brilliant, fascinating Countess, had spent many a gay and happy evening at her home in company with the smartest, most aristocratic people in Edelweiss. He tried to picture the astonishment and consternation that swept over all Edelweiss when it was learned that she was the sister of Jonifer the Hawk. Full sister to the infamous robber whose very name struck terror to all Graustark, whose deeds of devilry were anathematized in her own house by every man and woman who partook of her hospitality!

But what staggered Starcourt more than anything else, was the fact that she was the aunt of Gerane,—that most charming of women the aunt of Gerane! He was dazed. And, strange to say, he experienced a distinct feeling of relief—even joy—when it became known in the valley that the full truth about her had not come out. Apparently not even Baron Dangloss knew that she was Jonifer's sister.

As a direct result of the Jabassy incident he was denied the privilege of roaming the hills unattended.

"We want you where we can put our hands on you, Colonel Starcourt, in case we should have unwelcome visitors," explained Jonifer, tersely.

"They will not be unwelcome so far as I am concerned," remarked the captive, and Jonifer swore.

Starcourt was struck not only by the chieftain's indifference to the shocking fate of his sister but by Gerane's unconcern. Aside from the fact that the Countess's death under the circumstances caused him considerable uneasiness, Jonifer seemed to be dismayed only by the ill luck that deprived him and his men of a reliable and necessary ally in the city of Edelweiss.

Katrane meant nothing to Jonifer. He had no love for her nor, down in his heart, did he have the slightest respect for her. He used her to his own advantage and she, on the other hand, used him in a like manner. As for Jabassy, he was

beneath contempt so far as the Davoses were concerned. Jonifer felt a passing regret, it is true, over the collapse of certain hopes he had cherished in connection with Gerane's future. The death of the Countess Jabassy put an end to his perhaps idle dream of one day finding a place for his daughter among the elect through the offices and chicanery of this ignoble sister of his.

"I knew your aunt very well," ventured Starcourt a day or two after the news came through.

Gerane's lip curled a little, and into her eyes flashed the expression he had observed on more than one occasion: a dark look of hostility. They had come in a few minutes before from Julius Broadaxe's forge, where Jonifer and a number of men were gathered to discuss the catastrophe. She had refused to remain when her father roughly ordered the dragoon to "get out." Both of them had noticed the grin on Peter's face when the curt order came from Jonifer and the scowl that succeeded it when she elected to depart with him. Now they were standing in front of the fireplace, drying their wet boots.

"But not quite so well as you know her now," she retorted.

"It is a great shock to me," he said. "She was one of the most popular, one of the most charming, women in the city."

"And now that you know she was one of—one of us, you suddenly realize that she was not charming at all."

"I have said nothing of the kind. No matter what she has turned out to be, the fact remains that she—"

"The fact remains that she was my aunt," she interrupted, defiantly. "But I never spoke to her but once, when I was a little girl."

"I don't mind confessing that I was completely bowled over when I heard that she was Jonifer's sister and your aunt. Absolutely bowled over."

"But you knew that she was the great-granddaughter of

the Duke of Droon, didn't you?" she demanded, querulously.

"Yes, I had heard—"

"And you have known for weeks that I am his great-great-granddaughter, haven't you? It is a far cry, however, from the house in Prince Rudovic Street to this little cottage in the hills, Colonel Starcourt. Oh, I will admit that she was a grand and noble lady, and that sometimes I wished I could be like her, but let me tell you what I really thought of her,—what the daughter of the greatest robber in the land thought of your charming Countess. I thought she was ten thousand times worse than my father or any other man in the valley. We do not pretend to be anything but thieves, Colonel Starcourt, while she—well, you know what she pretended to be. I despised her."

"I wish you wouldn't keep on saying 'we' whenever you mention—" he began, but she interrupted him with a laugh.

"But you always say 'we' when you speak of honest people, don't you?" she cried.

"Certainly I do. And I include you when I use the pronoun in that connection."

"Pooh!" she cried, scornfully. Then, in her halting English, she said to him: "Pardon me,—I must—remain to my room—"

"Retire," he corrected.

"Retire to my room"—she frowned uncertainly—"for the change (oh, la, la!) my dress to—the change." Then anxiously in her own language: "How was that? Perfect,—no? Yes?"

"You could not be more perfect," said he gallantly.

"I am so pleased to be perfect in English," said she, with her rare dazzling smile. She was near her door when he called out, detaining her.

"See here," he said, seriously, as he came to her side; "sup-

pose the troops succeed in breaking into this valley, is there a way for me to get you safely out of here? I mean so that you wouldn't fall into their hands."

She stared, scarcely crediting her ears. "You mean you would help me to escape if there was a way out?"

"That is precisely what I mean. I don't want you to be captured and dragged off to the Tower."

"But—but you have told me that you longed to put me in the Tower yourself."

"Well, I've changed my mind," said he, crisply. "Now, is there another exit that we can take if necessary? Just say yes or no, please. I am not asking you to tell me now where it is. But is there a way?"

"You—you would save me? You would assist me to escape?" she persisted, wonderingly.

"Certainly. Didn't you save me from the firing squad?"

"Oh, yes, but I saved you because I wanted to make a—a vassal of you."

"Slave would be a better word," said he, his hand on his heart.

"And would you save me because you want to make a slave of me?"

He saw her eyes narrow for an instant as with pain and then widen dangerously.

"God forbid!"

"And why, pray, should you think that I would flee and leave my father here to face the soldiers, Colonel Starcourt?"

He hesitated a moment. "I know you would never desert your father while he lived, Gerane," he said, gently. "I only want to know if there is a way for you in case he—well, you know what I mean without my saying it."

She lowered her head. He could see her lip quiver. For a few moments she was silent, striving for control of her voice.

"Thank you, Colonel Starcourt," she said at last, lifting her eyes. They were dark and soft with gratitude. "There are but two ways out of this valley. One of them you know. The other is over the tops of the mountains and only the eagle, the hawk and the vulture can cross them. If the soldiers should come,—and they will if my aunt or her husband betrayed us,—the mouth of the gap down yonder will be piled deep with dead men and they will be wearing the uniform you love. This place is impregnable."

"I know nothing about the length of the gap nor where it leads. Your father takes jolly good care that I never get within a quarter of a mile of it. But I know something about the soldiers of Graustark. If they fail the first time they will come again, twenty thousand strong if needs be, and they will climb over the piles of dead men in uniform to—well, never mind. I want to get you safely out of this trap, Gerane, if there is any way in the world to do it."

"There is no way out for me," said she, and disappeared through the curtains of the door.

For several moments he stood where she left him, his brow dark with thought. As he moved off toward the door he shook his head despairingly. He was sick with the thought of the fate that probably lay ahead of her if the soldiers came and conquered. The Tower! Could he save her from the Tower? They undoubtedly would cast her into prison with the rest of them. Unless,—he shuddered at the mere thought of it,—unless she died before they could lay hands on her. Gerane dead,—that warm, lovely, adorable body cold and stiff in death, those beautiful eyes dull and staring, the soft, velvety cheeks a sickly, pallid hue— He groaned as he went out into the chill, unfeeling dusk of the dying day, and for the first time he found himself actually hoping that the soldiers would never come,—and he had been praying for them constantly, night and day, ever since he entered the valley. As he was

leaving, Rosa came into the room to light the two huge lanterns on the wall and the lamp on the table; the impression he carried with him as he plodded homeward had to do with the warmth, the hospitable glow, the friendly radiance, that filled the now enchanted home of Jonifer Davos.

From their hiding place beneath a floor board in his cabin he cautiously, furtively withdrew some sheets of paper. On them he had made outline drawings of the peaks, their relative heights and order of position. His purpose was obvious. The day might come when he, a free man, would find them of the greatest value in determining the probable location of the valley. Now he looked at them with frowning eyes. Should he destroy these maps that might lead him and a horde of troopers to the hiding place of poor, innocent, unfortunate Gerane Davos? He deliberated for a long time before restoring them to their hiding place. After all, he was a soldier. His hand, if not his heart, owed allegiance to the Crown.

As the weeks wore away and nothing happened, the inhabitants of the valley settled down to their normal condition of security and contempt for the authorities. The little bowl was, as usual, carpeted deep with snow. Gerane made excellent progress with her English. At the same time, love, as yet unspoken, made such progress that even her sometimes inexplicable whims failed to stem the sure tide that sooner or later was to sweep both of them up from the sea of doubt and leave them in each other's arms. Constant association, the gentle spur of propinquity, the irresistible forces that overcome reason,—all these were working toward the natural, inevitable end.

On her side there was pride and that everlastingly feminine reluctance to surrender; on his the doughty resolution to hold back until he was absolutely sure, not only of her, but of himself as well.

There were many things for him to take into consideration

and chief among them was the determination to be honorable. If he declared his love to her and she confessed her own, there could be but one solution to the problem that confronted him: marriage. He was not a snob; at the same time, high-minded and lovely as she was, there still remained the fact that she was a robber's daughter. More than that, there was a price upon her head. She was one of those whom the law, which was even greater than he, had sworn to exterminate! His own hand was against her. If the time ever came, could he approach the Crown, of which he was a servant, and say: "Here is one of them, but she is my wife and I love her. She is as pure as an angel, but she is the daughter of Jonifer Davos and in all fairness ought to go to prison with the other men and women we have taken."

He knew now that he loved her; he worshiped and adored this tantalizing daughter of Jonifer, but was very far from certain that she cared a snap of her fingers for him. At times he thought she did,—and then he was sure she didn't.

One day she would be sweet and—tractable was the only word he could think of that fitted,—the next would find her incomprehensibly cold and distant and captious. One day smiling, generous, full of fun; the next, as if repenting her docility, she would withdraw into her shell, so to speak, deliberately ignore him, absent herself on protracted visits to the homes of neighbors or shut herself up in her own room, and always at such times, it seemed to him, she had smiles only for Matilde, or Eljie or Rosa,—or even the dogs,—while for him she had nothing but polite indifference.

He was beginning to come to Jonifer's way of thinking: women were not made to be understood. Two or three times, moved by an almost ungovernable impulse, he had been on the verge of clasping her in his arms and—but, just when he felt reasonably, but perhaps not sanely, sure of her, she would do or say something to cause him to think better of it. He recalled

the old nursery rhyme and dolefully applied it to her: "When she was nice she was very, very nice, and when she was bad she was horrid." Only, he lamented, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't possibly be horrid.

And Jonifer met with no approval from him when he characterized his daughter as a "perfect little hellion."

Christmas came. A great bonfire was built on the knoll below Jonifer's house and on Christmas eve these amazing rogues, with their wives and children, gathering in the snow, chanted weird, thrilling hymns and carols until long past midnight. Gerane stood beside her father in the front line of the circle, while Starcourt, being an outsider and a captive, took his position as directed on the outskirts of the throng, some distance away. He could see her quite plainly, however. Indeed, he seldom took his eyes from her rapt, eager face, framed by the heavy fur cap that covered her head from crown to chin. The great blaze cast a glow over her lovely face already warmed, paradoxically, by the cold wind that came out of the north to kiss it in passing. He listened for her voice, but it was lost in the ringing chorus. He wanted to be near her, to stand so close to her that no wind could blow between their sable-clad bodies.

Suddenly he was aroused from his enchanted dream by the voice of a woman at his elbow. He turned his head and met the bright, antagonistic eyes of Ranya Brutz. She was saying:

"Dogs in the manger looking on while others sing praises to the child that was born in one," she sneered, her voice harsh and bitter. "Even thieves turn their backs upon us. The captive and the concubine have no place among them. We sit over against the walls of Nineveh and watch from afar off. Bah! And Christ was crucified but once!"

"You wrong them," said he. "Go among them. They will not cast you out."

"Little you know about it," she scoffed. "Every year I

come and take my stand outside the circle. My place is chosen for me and I must abide by the decree of those who do homage to Christ. Christ was crucified by the Jews. Look ye, man, and tell me if you can see a single Jew in all that throng of thieves who crucify me because I have lived in sin surpassing theirs. Christ held out his hand to Mary Magdalen, but these sanctimonious thieves turn their backs on me."

"Sanctimonious," chuckled he. "I like that, Mrs. Davos."

"Call me Ranya Brutz," said she, lifting her chin. "That is who I am. Nothing more. And behold my sons standing alone over yonder far outside the holy circle. Holy! Ha!"

He looked and saw the three figures in the field. "But surely, Ranya Brutz, your sons are valued, respected members of—"

"My sons are bastards," said she, without shame. "But that girl you feed your eyes upon is no more Davos than those sons of mine. She has no more of the blood of a noble duke of the House of Ganlook in her veins than flows in those of my boys. The only difference is that Jonifer Davos took the trouble to marry the girl who gave birth to her. But even a marriage ceremony does not alter the quality of blood that runs through the veins. The blood is the same. God attends to that. Look now! See my boys. They dare not go a step nearer that circle than they are now. It is forbidden. And yet in the very front row stands their blood cousin who, if it were not for the Grace of God and the whim of Jonifer Davos, might as easily have been a bastard as they."

"Oh, I say, you have no right to discuss—"

"Right? Who are you to say what is right or wrong for me to discuss? I know what you are counting on, curse you. You are after that girl of Jonifer's. You realize that you are here to stay, so you are going to make the best of it. I know what is in your mind. You will marry her, if you can, so that when Jonifer dies you may step into his place as chieftain."

Starcourt drew back in sheer astonishment. "So that I can be chieftain of this— What utter nonsense! Are you crazy?"

"You may think so if you like," she fairly snarled. "But I am not the only one who is saying that very thing. I've heard a dozen men say that they believe you have made up your mind to—"

"Good God, woman, I would no more think of—"

"And that is precisely what is in Jonifer's mind, too. He picked you as the man to take his place. We know it now. And let me tell you one thing, my pretty peacock. Whenever a Davos sets out to do a thing, he does it."

"But, confound you, I— You are talking the rankest nonsense. I am an honest man. The Davos does not live who can make a thief of me."

She turned on her heel. "Honest, eh? I was an honest girl until a Davos made me a thing to be scorned even by thieves."

She left him standing there, dumbfounded, and strode across the snow field to join her outcast sons.

"The damned vixen," muttered Starcourt, following her with angry, and at the same time, pitying eyes.

The next morning he asked Julius Broadaxe if it was true that men were talking about him as Ranya Brutz claimed they were.

Julius scratched his head. "Well," said he, pondering, "I have heard it said but always in jest. Ranya Brutz is a malevolent woman. She has only two notions in her head. One of them is that some day her son Peter may be leader here, the other is that he will marry Gerane. If I were a gambling man,—and I am not for the simple reason that I profess to be an honest one,—but if I were a gambling man I would bet my head and my wife's head and my father's skull that he will never be leader here, while as for Gerane marrying him —well, the world is not coming to an end in her time or mine,

either. Now, don't worry about it any more. This is Christmas Day. Have you given her a present yet?"

"A present? Good Lord, what have I to give?"

"Nothing much, I'll admit. But your name is Starcourt, isn't it?"

"Certainly."

"Well, suppose you step over to her house and offer it to her for Christmas. Of course, it's something you can't very well put into her stocking, but—"

"Don't be an ass, Julius," interjected Starcourt, coloring.

Meanwhile Gerane, a dreamy, languorous light in her eyes, was being laved and anointed in the usual fashion by the faithful Matilde. Her dress and warm undergarments were lying on the couch she had so recently occupied. The seductive perfume of spice-laden toilet water filled the room. From time to time she yawned and stretched her lithe young body, sighing lazily.

"I can tell without asking that your dreams were pleasant last night," said Matilde, looking up into the girl's face with an accusing smile.

Gerane started guiltily. "What makes you think so?" she asked. A delicate color began to spread over her body.

"Because the dream is still in your eyes, my dear."

"I am still sleepy," declared Gerane, defensively. "And besides your hands are unusually soft and gentle this morning, Matilde."

"Humph!" grunted Matilde.

Nothing more was said until Gerane was partly dressed. She was a little annoyed by the older woman's thinly veiled taunt. Rosa had removed the pails of water and the oil-skin carpet; Matilde was putting the room in order.

"Everybody dreams once in a while. Such queer, improbable dreams, too. I wonder why it is that so often they are utterly ridiculous and fantastic. I remember dreaming once

that I was no larger than a flea and was hopping from one country to another on a map that Heber Dykas had drawn of Europe and Asia and Africa. I came near to drowning when I misjudged the distance across the Mediterranean Sea. Wasn't that an odd dream? What do you suppose ever put such a ridiculous thing into my—"

"Now listen to me, my dear," broke in Matilde, coming over to sit beside her. "It is time I gave you a good, sharp lecture. Why do you mistreat Gavan Starcourt so vilely?"

"Vilely? How can you say such a thing to me? I am sure I treat him with the greatest consideration."

"I leave that to your conscience. Look into my eyes, Gerane. Why do you behave as you sometimes do when it hurts you so terribly because you love him with all your heart?"

"I do not love him!" cried Gerane, hotly.

"That is the first time I have ever known you to tell a deliberate falsehood, my dear."

"Well, suppose I do love him,—suppose I do," flared the girl defiantly. And suddenly her armor cracked. She leaned against Matilde and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Matilde!" she cried in a choked voice. Then she began to sob.

Matilde drew her close, stroking her hair tenderly. "Oh, my dear, my baby!" she whispered.

All of Gerane's vaunted, stoutly maintained self-possession was gone. She was a limp, pathetic figure,—all the more so because she had been such a brash, valiant little warrior up to this moment of complete surrender. Now she was a beaten, miserable little coward who cried as if her heart would break. Many minutes passed. At last she put her arm around Matilde's neck and murmured huskily, jerkily:

"Please don't scold me, Matilde. Please."

"Scold you, my child?" cried the other, amazed. She too

had been weeping silently. "Oh, my poor little darling, why should I scold you?"

"For—for making such a fool—of myself. I—"

"Bless your heart! You've never shown so much sense in all your twenty years as you have in the last five minutes. Come! Cheer up,—smile. I have been waiting for this. I knew it was bound to come. You love him. Now I understand why you have treated him so horribly at times. That is the way with women. You will change your tactics the instant you are sure that he loves you. Now, let me tell you something. It may set your mind at rest. He loves you."

Gerane sat up, staring incredulously.

"He detests me!" she cried. "Why shouldn't he?"

"For the best reason in the world,—an unfailing reason."

"But he does,—I know he does. He hates me. He believes I caused him to be brought here. He—"

"He believes nothing of the kind."

"I have tried so hard to convince him that I am sorry he is here. I want him to think that if I had my choice he would be anywhere else *but* here. Why, Matilde, do you know that I have told him to go to the devil? If that doesn't prove that I—"

"It doesn't prove anything," said Matilde calmly. "He isn't made of iron, is he? Women were made to be loved and men to love them. You could tell him to go to the devil a thousand times and he would love you all the more. Love is a great leveler. He is Lord Starcourt, he is an aristocrat. Nevertheless, my dear, if you say the word you can be Lady Starcourt to-morrow instead of Gerane Davos."

She spoke seriously, almost fiercely in her intensity. Gerane, her cheeks still wet, her eyes moist and starry, sat very still for a few moments, her body sagged as if from weariness.

"I have been mean to him, Matilde, but I never could be as mean as that."

"What do you mean?"

"I love him too much, I honor him too greatly, to—well, what could he say to his mother, his people, when he took his wife to them and they asked who she was? No, no, Matilde! I would die sooner than put him in that terrible position. He would have to tell them that I am the daughter of a robber, that I have been brought up among thieves."

"Hush! He may never see his people again. Consider—"

"I have been thinking a great deal about that very thing, Matilde," said Gerane, with a great sigh of renunciation. "If I can persuade father to set him free,—I mean if it can be accomplished without exposing the location of—"

"Put that thought out of your mind," interrupted the other, almost crossly.

"But it can be done, Matilde," argued Gerane. "He can be blindfolded and carried many miles from this place and left. It would not be any easier for him to find it than it was before. Don't you see how simple—"

"My dear Gerane, this is all very admirable and does you credit, but you do not take into consideration the effect such a proposition would have upon the men and women of this valley. Your father might be willing to turn him loose as you suggest, but do you for a moment imagine that the rest of them would consent? No, my dear; Colonel Starcourt is here to stay. There is nothing you can do about it. They would kill him without the slightest hesitation if you or your father undertook to set him free. And so, taking everything into consideration, it would appear that both of you are doomed to live in this hole at the top of the world for a long, long time. Have pity on the poor fellow, Gerane." Here she smiled and stroked the girl's tumbled hair. "Put him out of his misery."

"Put him out of his misery? Have pity on him? What do you mean?" Gerane sat up suddenly, her eyes wide with perplexity.

"How dumb you are. Marry him, you poor little simpleton."

"Marry—" She sprang to her feet angrily. "Don't you dare call me a simpleton! Marry him? I would rather die than—than do that."

"You love him, don't you?"

"That has nothing to do with it," cried the girl, stamping her foot. "He thinks badly enough of me as it is. What would he think of me if I ordered him to— Oh, Matilde, I couldn't bear the look of scorn he would—"

"Nothing could be farther from my thoughts than that you should order him to marry you. Compose yourself. Give him time. You will not have to issue a royal command, your highness. You will not have to put him in chains and blindfold him and drag him to the altar, with all the populace threatening to run sabers into him if he is stubborn. He will beg you to—"

"Go away! You make me furious!"

"Presently," said Matilde, holding out her hand. "Come and sit here beside me. You should be held in some one's arms for a while, my dear, and in lieu of Eros himself it may as well be me. You know who Eros was, don't you? He was the god of love. A joy and a torment to Venus. That's right. Sit here a while and then you can finish dressing."

Greatly to Starcourt's disappointment, she did not appear for the midday meal. Matilde explained that she had gone off to have dinner with old Heber Dykas, who was still laid up from the injury received some weeks before; there would be no lessons that day, so Colonel Starcourt was to be permitted to go ahead and enjoy the holiday in any way he liked.

"Hang these holidays," said he in disgust.

"I should think you would appreciate a rest," said Matilde.

"Especially a rest from that devilish little vixen," added Jonifer, who was very much put out by Gerane's absence.

"Well, to tell the truth, I am very much at a loose end without—er—without the lessons," said Starcourt. "I don't know what I shall do with myself."

"We are to have a jolly spread to-night, so be of good cheer," said Jonifer. "Save your appetite, my friend. You will need it when you face the roast pig, the—"

"He is saving it," said Matilde, maliciously. "He hasn't eaten a mouthful."

A bright idea struck Starcourt. "I shall take a long walk this afternoon. Tramping over the snow paths will give me a splendid appetite. And I'll stop in to see Heber Dykas on my way back, poor old chap."

"I am sure he will be very happy to see you," said Matilde. "And so will his niece. She is quite a pretty girl, don't you think so, Colonel?"

"I beg your—oh, yes, to be sure. Quite pretty. In fact, I will go farther than that and say that she is quite pretty."

It was nearly four o'clock when he set out for his tramp. Dykas lived half a mile up the road. Arriving at Heber's front gate, he paused for a moment and then turned in. Poor old Heber! Yes, he would go in at once and do what he could to cheer him up and make him happy,—and then continue on his walk. Rotten luck to be laid up on Christmas Day with a broken leg,—or was it both legs?

"Come in," shouted Heber, in response to his rap on the door.

He entered and found no one in the room save the old scholar himself, who was sitting all bundled up in front of the fireplace.

"Bless my soul," exclaimed Heber, surprised and pleased. "Now this is very kind of you, Colonel Starcourt. Remove your coat, sir, and draw up a chair. It is very cold outside, they tell me."

His visitor sat down and held out his hands to the fire. Presently, after wishing Heber a Merry Christmas and indulging in a few comments on the weather, Gavan solicitously inquired about his leg.

"My leg?"

"I should have said legs, Mr. Dykas."

"Aside from the fact that they are over seventy years of age, I would say that they are fairly sturdy," said Heber. "I daresay you mean my back."

"To be sure. Your back, Mr. Dykas. How is it?"

"Professor Gratz informs me that it will last me as long as I live, provided I do not live beyond reason," said the old man, chuckling. "During the interim I shall be obliged to sit in this chair. I am not quite sure whether Gratz is attending me in his capacity as doctor, tinker or astronomer. I only know that every time he tinkers with my back I see a great many stars. In the end, of course, he will minister to me as an undertaker. It is quite extraordinary, my dear sir, to find so many useful occupations concentrated under one hat,—all the more so, I submit, when we contemplate the size of Gratz's head. It is quite a small one."

"I wish I had some of your philosophy, Mr. Dykas," said Starcourt.

"The older you get the simpler it is to be philosophical, my young friend. I was very far from being a philosopher when I was your age. Suppose, for example, I had broken my back when I was eight and twenty instead of at the age of seventy. Age has its compensations, youth its obligations. So there you are, sir."

"And where *is* your niece?" inquired the visitor, after Dykas had expatiated at some length upon the excellent qualities of that young woman.

"She has gone off to skate on the pond with Gerane and

Peter and young Matthew. The three of them came in to have Christmas dinner with me. I do not know when I've had a jollier time. It does an old man good to have young people about, especially"—and here he winked—"when the little god of love is playing his game on the sly."

"What's that?" demanded Starcourt, with a start.

Heber cackled. "I will bet my head Jonifer does not know that Peter was coming here to-day. As for Matthew, there is no secret about him and my niece. They are to be married in the spring. But Peter and Gerane,—well, that is another matter. I will guarantee you have not heard a word about them,—now, have you?"

Starcourt swallowed hard before answering. "No,—not a word, Mr. Dykas. Are you—er—sure?"

"It is impossible to be sure of anything so far as Gerane is concerned. But, I will say this: I have never seen her so happy as she is to-day,—gay as a bird and brimming over with excitement. And she could hardly wait to go off skating with Peter. As a matter of fact, she wanted to be alone with him so much that when they saw you coming down the road she jumped up and insisted that they be off before you got here. They sneaked out the back way while you were knocking at the front door. I never knew such haste,—and it shows plainly how the wind blows, does it not?"

Starcourt arose. "I must be jogging along, Mr. Dykas. I came out for a long walk, you see, and it will soon be dark."

"Well, I wouldn't go near the pond if I were you, Colonel," advised the old man. "And, by the way, I wouldn't say anything about this to Jonifer, either. Let him find out—"

"Good day, Mr. Dykas. Many happy returns of the day," said the young man, nearing the door.

"The same to you, Colonel Starcourt," cried Heber, cheerily.

Now, Gavan Starcourt hadn't the slightest intention of go-

ing anywhere near the pond when he left Heber Dykas's home. On the contrary, he avoided it by taking one of the open woodland roads which would lead him far from the place where the skaters were enjoying themselves. He was feeling very bitter toward Gerane. He was surprised and disappointed in her. Hoodwinking her father like this,—it was abominable. And now that he thought of it, was there ever such a numbskull as Julius Broadaxe? Advising him to go to her and offer himself as a Christmas present? Ha! Ha! . . . But, good Lord! Could it be possible that she was in love with Peter and intended to marry him? . . . Had she been pulling the wool over every one's eyes all this time? . . . No! He could not, would not believe it of her! She was too fair, too honest, too high-minded, to play such a trick on her father. . . . And finally he sat down on a stump and told himself the truth. He was jealous. That was the long and the short of it: he was miserably, unhappily jealous. All doubts had gone out of his mind now,—not the shadow of one was left. He was desperately, madly in love with her—and he wanted her for his wife.

So he turned his footsteps toward the pond. His jaw was set, the fire of a great resolve in his eyes.

The pond was not far from the home of Ranya Brutz and her sons. Ranya herself was standing on the bank watching a dozen or more young men and women who were skating. Evidently she called Gerane's attention to him when he was still some distance away, for the girl, after looking in his direction for a moment, wheeled and skated off to join the Dykas girl on the opposite side of the pond. Peter and Matthew remained near their mother, gazing at him. Coming to the bank, he cupped his hands and called out:

"Gerane!"

She paid no heed to the call,—indeed, he thrice repeated it before she deigned to look in his direction.

"What is it?" she called back.

"Come here," he shouted. "You are wanted."

She skated up to him quickly, alarm in her eyes. Was he the bearer of bad news?

"Does—does my father want me?" she cried, stopping in front of him.

His heart smote him a little. Her eyes were wide with anxiety.

"No. But I do. I want you, Gerane."

"You—you—"

"Yes,—I want you. Will you come with me now, Gerane?"

"But I came with Elda and Peter. They are not ready to—" she stammered.

"Put out your foot, please. Let me take your skates off. Please, Gerane, dear,—I mean it. I want you."

She laughed jerkily. "How—how ridiculous," she faltered. Then she looked straight into his eyes for a moment and what she saw in them caused her own to fall. Without a word, she put out her foot and he began clumsily, hurriedly to unstrap the skate.

Peter came swinging up.

"What is the matter, Gerane? Has Uncle Jonifer sent for you?"

She faced him. Her voice shook a little as she replied.

"Colonel Starcourt has not told me, Peter. But I must go. All he will say is that I am wanted. Tell Elda, please."

"Then it must be something serious," said Peter, genuinely concerned. "Better let me come along. I may be needed."

"I will let you know, Peter, if you are needed," said Gerane, quite steadily now.

She and Starcourt were a hundred yards or more down the road before either of them spoke.

"I love you, Gerane," said he. "Now you know why I

want you to come home." A long silence. "Is—is there nothing you can say to me, Gerane?"

She shook her head. "I do not wish to talk," said she, looking straight ahead. "Please be good enough to—to—to hold your tongue, sir."

CHAPTER XIV

"TO MY BELOVED ENEMY"

Not another word was spoken until they came to Heber Dykas's house.

"I shall stop here," said she, much too calmly he thought. "Do not come in. You need not wait for me. I prefer to go home by myself, Colonel Starcourt!"

"I could not help it, Gerane," said he, standing in front of her. "I am sorry if I have distressed you,—but I shall not ask your pardon. That would be the worst kind of hypocrisy. I took the wrong time and the wrong place to let go of myself, I will admit, but—well, the mischief is done, Gerane. You know how I feel toward you."

She met his gaze steadily, unwaveringly. "Please go," was all she said. If he could have known how her heart was pounding!

He bowed. "I repeat, I am sorry to have distressed you," he said, and strode away.

She hurried up to Heber's door and opened it without knocking. The old man, not seeing well, thought she was his niece.

"Come in,—and close the door," he said, peevishly. "Don't stand there holding it open. How many times must I tell you that the cold air gives me a—"

"Oh, Heber," she cried, closing the door through which she had been peeping; "I am so—so happy! No,—I mean I am so unhappy! He—"

"Bless my soul! I thought you were Elda."

"Oh,—I wish I were Elda," gulped Gerane, and forthwith

opened the door again,—the merest crack. "Just think how happy she is going to be!"

"Well, well!" exclaimed Heber, nonplussed. "Now, what in the name of—"

"He loves me, Heber," she cried, coming quickly to his chair, her eyes dancing with joy. "He—he told me so. Can you believe it, Heber? He told me he loves me."

"Of course, I can believe it," said Heber. "Every fool in the place knows it. The main point is, do *you* love *him?* That is the question. No one has ever dreamed that you—"

"Can you keep a secret, Heber?"

"Be careful! Do not press too heavily against my shoulder. But what is the sense of keeping it a secret? Jonifer is bound to find out and when he does,—well, he will put a stop to it, my dear. And so he should. He probably will kill him. I am not saying he should be quite so hard as that on the poor fellow, but you must be prepared for the worst. He will never consent. And why should he? Peter is not the man for you, Gerane. Most certainly he is not—"

"Peter!" exclaimed Gerane, astounded. "Why,—why, what ever put it into your head that I am talking about Peter?"

"Bless my soul,—aren't you?"

Gerane clapped her hand to her mouth. She was horrified. She had babbled like a fool. Heber would tell Elda and Elda would—

"Oh, Heber," she cried a moment later, "you must swear on your sacred word of honor not to repeat a word of this. You will do *that* for me, won't you? Promise me you will not tell a soul,—not even Elda."

"If it isn't Peter," said Heber, perplexed, "then, who the devil is it?"

"Because I am so frightfully unhappy as it is and it would make me a thousandfold more unhappy if you—"

"If you were a thousandfold more unhappy than you look

to be at this moment, Gerane, you would burst with joy," said he drily. He took her hand in his. "So it is Colonel Starcourt, eh?"

Suddenly her brow puckered. "Oh, heavens! Do you think he was in earnest, Heber? You don't mean to say he was only saying it to—"

"My dear child, it is bad enough for you to lose your heart, but when you show symptoms of losing your mind like this,—well, there is no telling what may happen. Like as not you would forget yourself completely and tell him you do not love him. Now,—"

"Oh, dear!" sighed she, very soberly. "I wish I *could* be unhappy, Heber. I truly do. I am trying so hard to be unhappy."

"You poor little goose," said Heber, affectionately.

"On the other hand," said she irrelevantly and with some heat, "it was most officious of him. I must say he was very presumptuous. What right had he to insist upon— Now, my dear Heber, you *will* promise not to say a word to Elda or anybody else, won't you?"

"Aye, I give you my oath, Gerane," said he, patting her hand. "And it is not the first time you have sealed my lips. You— What? Are you going?"

"I must be off," she announced, pausing with her hand on the latch. "I am sorry I disturbed you, Heber, dear. Good-by."

"Oh, I see. Colonel Starcourt is waiting for you outside?"

"Indeed he is not! I sent him off about his— Goodness! I hope he isn't out there!" She opened the door a little and peered down the road. There was a distinct note of disappointment in her next remark. "He is not waiting, Heber. You were quite wrong. He is nowhere in sight. Good-by," and she was gone.

She was saying—aye, singing,—to herself as she hurried

along the road: "I want you, he said. I love you, he said. I want you, he said. I love you, he said."

The swift dusk was falling. She knew it would be quite dark before she reached home. The sun had dropped down behind the towering peaks to the west; lights were beginning to appear in windows far and near. She quickened her footsteps,—not that she was afraid of the darkness, but because of a sudden, irresistible longing to reach the sanctuary of her own tight, secure little room with no one near save the understanding Matilde. And she wanted to look at herself in the mirror, urged by the singular notion that her face had undergone a change that would render it unrecognizable! At any rate, she was sure it was not what it was when she last looked at it.

She was nearing Julius Broadaxe's forge when she descried a figure some distance beyond, a man walking rapidly toward her. Panic seized her. She recognized him. He had discarded the heavy fur coat—and suddenly she remembered that she had left her own sable garment at the pond, freeing herself of its weight and warmth while skating. She hadn't missed it till this instant,—and now she began to shiver. She had been so warm up to . . . Her pace slackened, she looked about in search of an open road or door-path into which she could dart; she even thought of turning back and running in the opposite direction. But that would be ludicrous. He would laugh at her. She would not let him see that she was a silly coward. And then she realized that she was curiously light-headed; her knees had become treacherously weak and strangely enough her feet were heavy. Something was pounding at her temples,—dull, muffled thumps that seemed to be stunning her into— But on she came, her lips apart, her eyes wide open, walking straight into the trap.

He stopped when he came to the dark, silent smithy, posting himself in the middle of the road directly in her path.

The waning light, penetrating the shadowy interior of the low, open shed that fronted the forge, revealed the closed doors beyond. She would have passed him by, her chin in the air, had he not shifted his position, intercepting her. There was nothing for her to do but stop. Either that, or walk into his arms. So she came to a standstill a few feet away.

"Come on, Gerane," he said, a little unsteadily. "Don't stop. It is no use, darling. I sha'n't let you pass."

She drew back. "What do you mean,—Starcourt," she demanded, raising her voice. "How dare you stop me—"

"I am not stopping you," he broke in, quietly. "I am asking you to come on. I shall stand here till you *do* come."

"I—I never heard of—of such insolence," she faltered. "Oh," looking around wildly, like a cornered animal, "is there no one to help me? Where is my father—Julius—"

"There is not a soul in sight," cried he, triumphantly. "What are you afraid of, Gerane dear? Of me? Surely you are not afraid of me. I love you with all my— Oh, my darling, don't cry!"

She had covered her face with her hands, her head was bent, he heard the catch in her breath—and thought it was a sob.

"Oh, you—you must not," she cried out chokingly,—and found herself clasped tightly in his arms. She felt his hand at the back of her head, pressing it forward irresistibly until it was held tight against his breast. Her own arms for the moment were hanging limp and helpless. She thought her heart was going to burst. He was whispering something,—his lips close to her cheek—but there was such a turmoil in her ears that she could not understand a word he was saying. His cold cheek was touching hers,—how cold it was! Was hers so cold? Finally she made out the words,—he had uttered them often enough:

"Tell me you love me, Gerane! Tell me, darling. I—I—Lift your head, Gerane,—and kiss me."

Her hands, suddenly strong and eager, went up to grasp his arms. She cried out, entreatingly: "Oh, you must not do this thing to me! You must let me alone! I—I can't bear it."

"You *do* love me? Say you do, Gerane."

She gave up. The fight was over. She relaxed in his embrace, a long ecstatic sigh issuing from between her lips.

"I do—oh, I do!"

Again her arms hung limp in complete surrender. He pressed his lips to hers; his were eager, alive, demanding, while hers were still parted, slack, helpless.

"God!" he whispered, hoarsely, his clasp tightening. "It's true!"

Then he held her off, his hands gripping her shoulders, his eyes searching for hers in the darkness that had so swiftly enveloped them.

"I—I wish I could see your eyes, Gerane. I wish— Are they open?"

She did not answer for a few seconds. Then she said, at the end of a sigh:

"They are now. You—you kissed me." There was something akin to awe in her voice.

"But you did not kiss me, Gerane. You did not give back what I—"

"I have never been kissed on the lips by a man in all my life. But,—oh, I *do* love you. I have dreamed of being kissed by you, and held like this in your arms, and—oh, what a fool I am to tell you all this—"

"Kiss me now!" he commanded, drawing her close again.

"Let me go," she cried in sudden trepidation. "We—we are out here in the road. Some one may be coming along—" His lips cut the sentence short.

"That was better," he pronounced a moment later, as if passing judgment. "Two or three lessons more, darling, and you will—"

"But not out here on the road," she interrupted, and forthwith struggled to free herself. "It is so—so public."

"Public?" he scoffed, exultant and exalted. "Bless your heart, it's as dark as pitch."

"But it is darker in the shed," she murmured, an abashed, tremulous little laugh struggling through her lips. "I am so afraid some one will see—"

"Then you are not afraid of me any longer, Gerane?" he whispered, tenderly.

"Afraid of you? I have never been afraid of you."

He put his arm about her shoulder and, without a word, they entered the shed.

"I feel so much safer here than I did out in the open road," she sighed when they were come to the darkest, most sheltered corner. . . . And presently her lips were warm and her arms were tightly clasped about his neck.

A long time afterward she panted weakly: "You—you must let me go home now."

"Before you go, Gerane darling,—will you be my wife? So that my home may be your home forever? So that we always may go home together and never have to leave each other—like this?"

"Oh, I wish I could be sure that you will always want me," she cried, a queer bleakness in her voice.

"You can be sure, Gerane," he said, simply.

"But I am—I am one of the robbers of Droon Forest. You must think long and well before you—"

"I have thought long and well," said he. "I want you to be my wife."

"My father is a thief and an outlaw. My grandfather was the same."

"I am not asking your father or your grandfather to marry me," he said, putting his hand to her cheek.

"Then, there is something else to consider," she persisted.

"You are my enemy, you are my father's enemy. Would I be doing right by my father, by my own people, if I married you, Colonel Starcourt?"

"Isn't it about time you began to call me Gavan?"

"Well, then,—Gavan. Are you forgetting that duty and honor may continue to demand a—a certain thing of you?"

"You mean?"

"It is your duty to hunt down and perhaps slay my father, —Gavan. He is the leader of the robbers of Droon Forest. The hand of every honest man is against him, including yours. You ask me to be your wife. I love you—oh, I love you with all my heart,—but how can you expect me to marry you knowing that the day may come when you— Oh, it is too terrible even to think about, Gavan!"

He was silent for a long time. "I may never leave this place," he said at last. "But if I should, and you go with me, Gerane, my hand will never be raised against my wife's father."

"What—what would you do?" she cried, in wonder.

"I have thought it all out. I shall resign from the army and go to England to live. But, Gerane, there is one thing that you must face. I can never leave this place alive unless the soldiers come and conquer. If that ever comes to pass, you will go away with me, but your father will stay here. There will be no need thereafter for me or any other man to hunt him down. Do you understand?"

He expected her to flinch and cry out in pain, but she did neither. Instead, she straightened her figure, drew a long breath, and said with surprising calmness:

"I do, Gavan. My father will die fighting them. That is in the bargain. Every man here will die fighting. But you are wrong when you say that I will go away with you. I shall fight alongside my father and when he falls,—so shall I."

"Good God, Gerane!" he cried, aghast. "You don't mean to tell me you would—"

"I have made a vow, Gavan," she said, distinctly.

"That was before I came. Things have changed in—"

"So now you see why it would be wrong for me to—to say I will be your wife," she interrupted, her voice low and curiously husky.

"Listen to me," he said, rather sternly, his hands on her shoulders. "This very night I shall ask your father's consent to our marriage. He may refuse. He may order me shot for my presumption. But if he consents, Gerane,—if he is willing that I should have you,—there is nothing in God's world that can save you, my dear. Your doom is sealed. You will be Mrs. Gavan Starcourt,—or if you prefer it, Lady Starcourt,—and be damned to the consequences! And, hark you well, my dear, I shall be very much surprised if I have to exercise my authority as your lord and master and put you in chains to keep you from dying on the field of battle. No, on second thought, if after you've been my wife for a while, you should come to me and say you think it would be much nicer to die on the field of battle than to go on living with a cruel tyrant, I promise not to oppose you. Now, nothing could be fairer than that, I vow."

"Don't be silly," she cried, and put her arms about his neck again.

The voices of men talking in the road brought them sharply to earth. They lifted their heads and listened. The crunch of boots on the frozen snow heralded the approach and then, a moment later, the presence of three dark, almost invisible shapes in front of the shed. They came to a standstill not ten feet from the black corner that sheltered the lovers. Peter's voice was easily recognized.

"Wait here," said he. "I will go alone to Uncle Jonifer's.

If he is sick or has been hurt, I will return at once. Wait for me here."

"You are a fool, Peter," said Joseph, his brother. "There is nothing wrong with him, I tell you."

"I did not ask you to come," growled Peter. "You have been croaking all the way—"

"She was waiting for him to come," argued Matthew. "I saw her look down the road a hundred times before he came in sight. She was watching for him, I tell you."

Starcourt felt her body stiffen and heard the sharp intake of her breath. His arm tightened.

"Shut up!" snapped Peter. "I've heard enough of that, Matthew. I am going to find out if they were lying when they said she was wanted at home. If she is there,—that's one thing. If she isn't—well, that's another. I want to see the look in Uncle Jonifer's eyes when I give him her coat and tell him she was in such a hurry to get home to him that she went off and forgot it."

"I see some one with a lantern coming out of uncle's house," said Joseph.

A long silence. Then from Peter: "He is coming this way."

Joseph laughed: "Probably Uncle Jonifer starting out to look for Gerane, who by this time is very pleasantly lost, I suppose," he sneered. "Lord, but I'd like to be in Starcourt's place and lost in the dark with her."

"Or in somebody's barn," said Matthew, adding a foul conjecture. "That's probably where they are at this very minute."

Gerane's convulsive, warning grip on her companion's arm was all that kept him from hurling himself upon the speaker.

"I ought to break your head for that," said Peter, threateningly.

"More than likely she is sending that pet slave of hers back to get her coat," suggested Joseph, after a silence.

"Well," began Peter, his voice thick and repressed, "we may as well walk along and meet him. If it is Starcourt I will give him the coat—and something else besides, damn him."

They moved off. The crunch of their feet grew faint before Starcourt ventured into the road. He saw the lantern, still some distance away. Gerane was gripping his arm.

"Let go of me, Gerane," he exclaimed, trying to jerk himself free. "Stay back here and keep out of it. I couldn't do anything while you were in there with—"

"Don't be a fool," she cried in a low, intense voice. "We will stay right where we are and wait for them. And you are not to fight,—do you hear me? What have we done to be ashamed of? Keep out of this, if you please. This is my affair."

"Do you think I am going to allow that dirty whelp to say what he did—"

"Keep quiet," she commanded, imperiously. "Obey me, Colonel Starcourt! Please do not forget that I am your mistress, sir."

"Mistress?" he gasped.

"Put your arm around me. Do as I say! Now, we will wait for my father. And I shall say all that is necessary to my cousins." Her voice was clear and almost sharp.

They stood there waiting. The three brothers met and stopped the man with the lantern. Some minutes passed and then the four of them strode rapidly in their direction, Jonifer in front,—as was his right. Starcourt bent his head and whispered:

"By gad, Gerane, you—you *are* a princess. You've got the blood in you. You are not even trembling."

"Why should I tremble?" she demanded, haughtily. "Am

I not the daughter of the king of the robbers?" There was deep irony in the question.

Jonifer's pace slackened when the light of the lantern revealed the figures in the road; he stopped stockstill on recognizing them. His nephews halted, peering in astonishment past his rigid bulk. Gerane spoke.

"If you are looking for me, father,—here I am."

Her father was silent for a moment. Then he said, slowly, levelly:

"So I see." No more than that.

"I am sorry if you worried about me. But, as you can see, I am quite safe,—perfectly safe."

Another brief silence. "You may remember, Colonel Starcourt, my saying something to you about trifling with my daughter. I said I would kill you as I would a dog." His voice was hard, deadly.

"I remember it very well," said Starcourt, lifting his chin. "If you—"

"I asked you to be silent, Colonel Starcourt," interrupted the girl. Then to Jonifer: "Colonel Starcourt has something to say to you, father, but not in the presence of my cousins. I have something, however, to say in their presence. I was standing in that shed when they stopped out in front. I was with the man who has asked me to be his wife. I was in his arms because I love him. But that is neither here nor there. We heard everything that Joseph and Matthew said. They were not very complimentary to me. They can thank God that I prevented Colonel Starcourt from—from making them eat their words. I will say for Peter that he was man enough to tell Matthew that he ought to break his head for what he said. I sha'n't forget that, Peter. But I must ask you to take your brothers home, and to tell them for me that they are never to speak to me again as long as they live, nor are they ever to come near me." She drew Starcourt to one side.

"Now, there is room for them to pass without coming close to me. Take them home, Peter. At once!"

"You—you don't mean this, Gerane," cried Peter. "Think it over before you—"

"I *do* mean it," said she, curtly. "You heard what they said and you know what they meant."

"But you put the wrong meaning upon—"

"Were you mistaken about Matthew's meaning when you spoke of breaking his head? Come! Be gone with them, Peter."

"One moment," broke in Jonifer, blocking the way as the brothers started to sidle off toward the farther edge of the road. "What was it that Joseph and Matthew said about you, Gerane? I want to know."

Starcourt stepped into the breech. "I will answer that question later on, Jonifer," he said quickly. "As for these filthy blackguards,—I mean Joseph and Matthew, for I have no quarrel with Peter,—I ask your permission to meet them to-morrow morning with any weapon they may select, and that you will supply me with a similar—"

Gerane silenced him with a word. "Gavan! Enough of this! The matter is closed. There will be no fighting, no killing. I will not have it,—do you understand? All of you? Now, go, Peter,—and take them with you. They need not walk in fear and trembling, now or henceforth, for I promise you, Peter, that neither my father nor Colonel Starcourt will call them to account."

"How is this?" cried Jonifer, hotly. "You speak for me, girl? You presume to give orders to me—"

"This is our affair,—the family's affair," she interrupted. "Be sensible! Would you make it a topic for discussion by all the people in the valley?"

"We will see about it," said Jonifer, surlily. "And now, you will come home with me."

Peter and his brothers walked off into the darkness, their heads bent, while Jonifer and his daughter turned their faces south. His arm was about her shoulders; the lantern, carried in his free hand, dangled between him and Gavan Starcourt.

"Go to your room," were his first words, and they were not uttered until they were inside his house. She obeyed him without a word, but favored Starcourt with a shy, encouraging smile that warmed his blood and dazzled him. His head swam for a moment. He had kissed those red, smiling, adorable lips and—the curtain fell behind her.

"Now, Colonel Starcourt," spoke Jonifer, levelly. He had taken a position in front of the fireplace, his back to the flames. His dark eyes were fixed upon the young man's face. They were unsmiling.

The long table in the center of the room was set for a dozen guests. The tapers in the spreading candelabra at either end were still unlighted. Tankards of copper and goblets of silver ranged down the two sides of the board,—promise of the merriment that was to fill the friendly room later on. Starcourt smiled faintly as he took in the cheerful array at a glance.

"If I could have my way, Jonifer Davos, this feast tonight would celebrate not only Christmas, but also the betrothal of your daughter and one who now asks you for her hand in marriage," he said, advancing. Stopping in front of Davos, he continued seriously. "Less than an hour ago I came here to ask for your permission to pay court to her. You were not at home. She had dismissed me at Heber Dykas's home a little while before. I set forth to meet her, disobeying an implied command. I have the honor, sir, to inform you that I love Gerane and would devote my whole life to her. Need I say more, Jonifer?"

It seemed to him that those keen black eyes were boring deep into his very brain. They did not waver, they did not soften.

"Has she told you that she loves you?"

"Yes," simply and directly.

Jonifer paused. "Then, you may be sure she does. Has she told you she began to love you the day she first saw you on the Highway?"

"No, Jonifer. Nor have I told her that, without knowing it, I began to love her at the same time."

"Go slow, my friend," said Jonifer, harshly. "You forget that you thought she was a boy on that occasion."

"Nevertheless, sir,—she was a girl. It began then, Jonifer. I know it now. We cannot explain these things. I did not know who she was when I saw her on the streets of Edelweiss. But love was at work then, Jonifer. I did not know it. I came here as a captive,—aye, as a birthday gift to her. I ought to have despised her. But I did not. I could not. Love was my captor. I could not despise love, Jonifer."

He paused. Jonifer's face was still hard, but a softer light had come into his eyes.

"It would be a lie if I were to say to you that I have not had this very thing in mind, Starcourt," he confessed. "What is more, if Gerane had come to me at any time and told me that she loved you and wanted you for a husband,—not for a lover, mind you well,—I should have given you the choice between death and marriage. It would not have mattered to me if you protested that you did not love her. There is nothing I would not give her. If she wanted you, she should have you, that is all. Now, we understand each other. Your hand, sir. In view of what my desire and my intentions were in the beginning, I can hardly be expected to withhold my consent." He spoke with simple dignity. "I know she loves you. I believe you when you tell me you love her. How could you help it? I shall take pleasure to-night in announcing to our friends the betrothal of my daughter Gerane and

Colonel Gavan Starcourt,—our prisoner. For, when all is said and done, sir, you must remain our prisoner until the time comes when of your own free will you are ready to declare your intention to become one of the robbers of Droon Forest."

Their hands were clasped. Starcourt shook his head.

"Then, Jonifer, I am doomed to remain a prisoner here for the rest of my life, unless I am rescued," said he, quietly.

"I am glad you said that, Starcourt. If you had even intimated that the other alternative was possible, I would have known you for a liar. We understand each other."

"The trouble is," began Starcourt, rather dismally, "Gerane says she will not marry me."

Whereupon the indomitable brigand's jaw fell and a look of positive consternation came into his eyes.

"Now, curse me,—are you sure she says that?"

"But I think I can induce her to change her mind," said the other, smiling confidently.

But Jonifer's face grew longer. "I know her better than you do. If she says she will not,—why, she will not, and that settles it. And after all the trouble—"

Gerane's clear, laughing voice interrupted him. The two men whirled and beheld her radiant face protruding between the curtains which were clutched tightly under her chin.

"But on the other hand, if I say I will,—why, I will, and that settles it," she said, adding in her halting but precise English: "So put that in your pipes, gentlemen, and smoke it."

Her head disappeared.

"Now, damn me!" exclaimed Jonifer. "Eavesdropping."

"Did you ever see anything so enchanting?"

Jonifer's gaze lifted to the portrait over the fireplace. He said nothing but a moment later offered his tobacco pouch to Starcourt. Then, for half an hour, they conversed in undertones, with occasional glances at the motionless curtains.

The guests began to arrive. First came Julius Broadaxe and his wife. They were followed by the Jahn Crispos, young Jan Melby and Flavia, and last of all Professor Gratz and his granddaughter Neva. Presently they were all gathered about the long board, Gerane and her father in the center with their backs to the fire.

Opposite them sat Starcourt and Matilde.

The former could not take his fascinated gaze from the lovely creature across the table. She wore a gorgeous, shimmering gown of yellow silk. More than twenty years had elapsed since it came to the valley as a part of the wardrobe of gay, fashionable Louise Hazenstahl; no doubt it had been seen and admired by royal eyes in the Courts of Vienna and Edelweiss; of a certainty it had swept through stately halls. It was of another age, another period; it was out of style; but Starcourt, so lately in touch with the world of fashion, saw only the young girl who so vividly brought it out of the past and made it a living, breathing thing of beauty. It was cut low in the neck, revealing Gerane's smooth, white breast; high in the back. Her shapely graceful arms were bare except for the gold and turquoise band that adorned one of them above the elbow. A silver anadem, exquisitely wrought and studded with small diamonds, circled her head, coming well down upon her brow. There were massive diamond and ruby rings on her fingers, but she wore no earrings.

Matilde, in a low tone, informed him that these were only a part of the mother's jewels. She seemed a little annoyed with Gerane for declining to wear a string of pearls that Baron Hazenstahl had given his daughter on her eighteenth birthday.

"And Gerane comes by them honorably," she was saying, a trace of irony in her voice. "They are not stolen goods, Colonel Starcourt."

"Ravishing," murmured he, and she smiled understandingly.

The conversation was at its height when Jonifer suddenly leaned close to Gerane's ear and whispered. Starcourt saw a startled look leap into her eyes. Then she turned them full upon him, holding his gaze for a moment before lowering her lashes. A warm, delicate glow tinted her white breast, spreading to her cheeks. She hesitated and then nodded her head. Whereupon Jonifer arose, his eyes agleam.

"Rosa!" he called to the servant who was on the point of leaving the room. "Fetch me now the wine I had you bury in the snow." She scurried away. "The time has come, my friends, for us to drink a toast in liquid gold to the great-great-granddaughter of the Duke of Droon."

"Ho! Ho!" boomed the men, lifting their hands.

"Hi! Hi!" cried the women.

"For nearly twenty years two merry bottles have kept each other company in the darkest corner of my cellar. My father put them there when his granddaughter here was a tiny babe. They were not to be opened until—er"—here he floundered awkwardly—"until—er—well, until this very night. Ho, there, Rosa! You slow-footed wench! When—aha! here you are."

He took the two wet, grimy bottles from the excited servant and with a mighty hand proceeded to twist the bulging cork from one of them. Then he himself passed around the board, filling the silver goblets with the pale "golden liquid." Coming to his place beside Gerane, he lifted his own glass, a signal for the others to come to their feet.

"Drain your goblets, all of you, to the health and happiness of my daughter, who, this very day, has betrothed herself to three most excellent gentlemen, Colonel Gavan Starcourt, of the Duke's Dragoons, Lord Starcourt of England, and

Count Maris-Starcourt of Graustark." Jonifer was in high good humor.

For a moment there was silence. The group was stunned. Then a joyous cheer and the cup was drained. At once Gerane sprang to her feet, holding high her full goblet, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks rosy.

"And I, who am to be his wife, please God, drink alone to my beloved enemy."

CHAPTER XV

"EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY"

For days the inhabitants of the valley talked of little save the approaching marriage. At first there had been nothing but approval of the most enthusiastic character; as time went on, however, a sly, insidious force began to stir in the naturally suspicious minds of the robbers. In some way the impression got abroad that Jonifer Davos had deliberately, almost mendaciously, gone outside the valley to find a leader to succeed him when the time came for him to lay down the scepter. Nominally, of course, the mantle must fall to his daughter, but, behind the hand, it was being bruited about that he had looked far ahead when he brought young Starcourt to the valley.

It was suspected that he had had a definite purpose in mind when he set about to provide Gerane with a husband. At least, so said the secret voices that whispered in the valley; and it was not long before they spoke loudly enough to be heard by Jonifer and his household.

Starcourt was the first to scent a change in the manner of the robbers, but he said nothing about it. Heretofore, he had enjoyed,—if that is the proper word,—a sort of friendly intimacy with the men and women with whom he came in almost daily contact. True, he was perfectly well aware that their interest was due in no small sense to the fact that each and every one of them regarded him as a common liability and, because of his very helplessness, were inclined to treat him with mild if slightly contemptuous geniality.

Of late, however, this spirit of friendliness was noticeably lacking among them; especially was this true of the younger men. At no time had he been misled or deluded by the treatment accorded him by his captors; he knew that they would cut his throat without the slightest compunction if needs be. They looked upon him as a natural foe, secretly hated him, were considerate and jovial only because they had no fear of him. And why not? Was he not the commander of the men who slew their comrades? It was most unnatural to expect them to ever forget that fact, even though they smiled when conversing with him and when they waved their hands at him from afar.

When it became known that Jonifer intended to build an addition to his house as soon as the weather permitted, indignation ripened into acute irritation. Throughout the valley ran the first shiver of revolt.

Later on, fuel was added to the fire by the casual announcement of the chief himself that as soon as they were married Gerane and her husband were to reside in the main house, whilst he purposed dividing his time between the new addition and the cottage at present occupied by the prisoner.

This was too much. It was high time, growled the majority of the clan,—urged and prodded by their wives,—that Jonifer was made to realize that this sort of thing could not be tolerated. What right had he to turn over to this lordly young outsider the house that for years had been looked upon as a palace belonging, by sentiment if not in fact, to all the people in the valley? They had built it many years ago for his sire; their hands or those of their fathers had labored long and loyally in its construction; they had hewn the finest timber in the forest, they had hauled stone cut from a stubborn mountain, they had made the bricks, dug the cellars, drilled the well, thatched the roof as no other roof in the valley was thatched,—they had done all these things for Jonifer the

First, they had rejoiced when it descended in due time and proper order to his son and heir, and now, under their very noses, it was about to be delivered over to a stranger, whether or no, because it happened to suit the pleasure of Jonifer the Second.

High time, moreover, declared the wives of the robbers, that something was done to curb the tyrannical ambitions of Mistress Gerane! Who was she, they argued, that she should profess scorn for plunder honorably and perilously taken on the Highway? Who was she to spurn the diamonds and rubies and fabrics rare that were laid at her feet by gallant heroes on her birthday simply because they were stolen? And, more than anything else, who was she to turn up her nose at all the fine upstanding young men in the valley, as goodly a lot of fellows as you would find in a year's search? Who was she, indeed, to think that no one short of a count or a noble lord was good enough for her?

Jan Melby, one of the guests at the Christmas feast in Jonifer's house, and at one time a determined suitor for Gerane's hand,—(dissuaded, it may be stated here, by Jonifer's bland announcement that he would put a bullet through his heart if he did not cease bothering her with his odious attentions),—Jan Melby was the most outspoken of these malcontents.

It is true that Jan had taken unto himself a wife in the person of Flavia Erick almost immediately upon discovering that he couldn't have Gerane, but it is also true that he still loved and secretly coveted the daughter of Jonifer. He was a wild, handsome, ruthless young dare-devil who would have thought nothing of summarily ridding himself of Flavia if the time ever came when she stood between him and his heart's desire. There were many who had looked upon him as the proper husband for Gerane. He was the dashing type of bravo whose deeds of valor found favor with a certain and

by no means insignificant element. A fitting leader, said they, to take the place of Jonifer. And so, for a very good reason, it was Jan Melby who frowned upon the proposed alliance with darker intensity than all the rest and it was he who, surreptitiously at first and then openly, harangued the more or less indifferent populace into an active state of foment. He succeeded in stirring up bitter antagonism to the marriage of Gerane and the man he was pleased to describe as "our lordly bondman."

The announcement that Heber Dykas, who had officiated for more than a generation at all the weddings in the valley, was to perform the ceremony at his house on the morning of March the fifteenth brought matters to a climax. A committee of young men, headed by Jan Melby, waited on Jonifer and presented what by this time had become a general grievance.

The chieftain heard them through and then, to their astonishment and relief, gravely announced that he would at once set a day for a mass meeting on which occasion the situation might not only be openly and thoroughly discussed, but his own aims and desires put before the people in such a manner that no one could doubt his wisdom or his fealty. This was agreeable to the majority, most of whom had anticipated trouble, Melby alone having the hardihood to state with a boldness that the others lacked:

"This marriage is not to take place, Jonifer. You will find us willing,—aye, more than willing,—to talk the matter over with you. I can even promise that Starcourt may continue to abide here with us under certain conditions. But I may as well make it plain to you now that this marriage will not be allowed."

Jonifer remained calm and apparently unruffled in the face of this declaration.

"And in case I decide to go ahead with it, Jan,—what then?" he inquired.

"There is a very effective way of putting a stop to it, Jonifer," answered Jan, significantly.

"Murder, I suppose,—eh?"

"Call it what you please," said the other. "The Crown does not call it murder when it hangs or beheads your people after it makes prisoners of them, Jonifer."

"Nor does it give its daughters to them in marriage," said another, sullenly.

"On Friday night, then," answered Jonifer, as if he were addressing so many school boys, "in front of the blacksmith's shop. There is ample space there for all who wish to hear and be heard. Let there be no women present."

With that, he turned on his heel and entered the house.

Meanwhile, Baron Dangloss and Corpaz, his right-hand man, temporarily baffled by the joint suicide of Katrane Jabassy and her husband, were not idle. They had, so to speak, tasted blood. Their suspicions had been substantiated far beyond their wildest hopes; an uncertainty had resolved itself into a positive fact. After the first shock of disappointment wore away, that astute mind of the Minister of Police found reviving food for thought in the conviction that the Jabassys were not the only persons in Edelweiss in league with the robbers. Corpaz maintained that it would have been impossible for them to dispose of their share of the plunder without the secret aid of "go-betweens" or even confederates actively connected with the band.

The banking and money-lending concern of E. Blotz & Sons had always been looked upon with suspicion by the authorities.

It is not necessary here to follow the mental peregrinations of Peter Corpaz. Suffice it to say that in course of time he

discovered that Count Jabassy was in the habit of transacting business in a strictly sub rosa fashion with the Blotz bank. Further investigation led to the questioning of the two "sons" (there was no elder Blotz) and subsequently to a grilling that resulted in the authorities taking over the concern and lodging the active partners in prison for violation of the banking laws.

It was many days, however, before one of the "sons" broke down and provided Dangloss with a complete roll of "shareholders" widely at variance with the published list. He stoutly declared, however, that neither he nor his brother was aware of dealings between any of the shareholders and the robbers of Droon Forest. Dangloss was finally convinced that the man spoke the truth. Certain noblemen and merchants who were examined because of their connection with the bank and who admitted that they knew of usurious loans and other malodorous dealings with clients, satisfied the authorities that they were in complete darkness so far as the Jabassys were concerned.

Among the secret shareholders were three well-known gentlemen whose absence from Edelweiss now became a matter of considerable moment. Corpaz and two other men of the secret service were sent off in search of Count Delawar, Shenke and Mingovard, who were to be questioned as to their relations with Blotz & Sons. The coincidence of their leaving Edelweiss almost immediately after the suicide of the Jabassys, together with the fact that they, as well as the Count and Countess, were now known to have been interested in the nefarious schemes of Blotz & Sons, convinced Baron Dangloss that their hasty departure from the city was not so innocent as it appeared. Corpaz characterized it as a flight. In any case, they were to be apprehended and brought back for examination.

Shenke was found in Paris by Corpaz. Delawar was seized in Brussels. Mingovard, according to all the informa-

tion obtainable, had sailed for the United States. Count Delawar committed suicide on the Orient Express while en route to Vienna in charge of two detectives. Shenke, who had been led to believe that the Jabassys had betrayed him, made a clean breast of everything so far as he was able to do so. He admitted his dealings with Jonifer and the Jabassys but was not to be shaken in his statement that he had absolutely no knowledge of the actual retreat of the robbers. This, he reiterated, was known only to the Countess. So far as he knew, not even Jabassy was in possession of that important secret. This much, however, he did know and he gave it to Dangloss for what it was worth: the gigantic brothers, Seege and Samon Digman, who conducted the historic old inn on the road to Semlik, were, beyond a doubt, tenants of the Countess Jabassy. He knew for a fact that she visited them regularly and collected rent from them, even after the land had been reclaimed by the Crown following the death of her mother, in whom title had been vested by royal decree so long as she lived. Now, Dangloss on hearing this, was puzzled, for he knew that the Digmans had been paying rent to the Crown treasury for a number of years. If they were paying money also to Countess Jabassy—well, here was something worth looking into!

And so it was that just about the time the opposition to Gerane's marriage reached the stage chronicled in the foregoing paragraphs, Peter Corpaz and Nikolas Brann, posing as sportsmen, came to Digmans' Inn for a few days' stag shooting in the forest. It was no uncommon thing for gentlemen of Edelweiss to visit the inn at this season of the year for similar purposes. Indeed, at this very time, there were three "hunting gentlemen," well known to the Digmans, stopping at the ancient hostelry. Corpaz and Brann, having brought down eight stags in half as many days, set out for Edelweiss with their fine supply of venison,—and antlers,—

on the day that Jan Melby and his committee called upon Jonifer Davos. The Digmans were sorry to see them go. They had been jolly, liberal guests; it was a pleasure to entertain them.

And never, professed both Corpaz and Brann as they said good-by to the keepers of the inn, had they experienced better luck in all their lives. They promised, with enthusiasm, to return!

Shortly after dark on Friday evening the men of the valley began to gather in front of the smithy. By eight o'clock there were more than a hundred of them assembled in the fairly extensive space from which the snow had been cleared. A dozen lanterns fixed at the top of poles and lances stuck into the snow banks that rimmed the clearing cast a sinister light upon the scene. The wide doors of the forge were open and a ruddy fire blazed in a bed of coals, responding to the bellows vigorously manipulated by Broadaxe's apprentice.

Gerane and Starcourt, standing in Jonifer's dooryard some distance away, gazed upon the dark, restless group of men with no little concern.

The girl's head was high, her eyes smouldered with the anger that filled her soul. Why should these people question her right to marry as she pleased? What right had they to oppose the will of Jonifer Davos, their chieftain? The scurvy ingrates! The fools!

Starcourt was silent, moody. He sensed tragedy beyond the ken of this girl who had known nothing but adulation since she was old enough to realize anything; whose attitude toward the robbers was that of a princess before whom they, figuratively at least, were wont to bend the knee. As they stood there, arm in arm, he could feel that hers was tense and rigid.

"My father will show them," she said, loftily, almost

arrogantly,—and she had said it more than once. "Just you wait, Gavan, till he stands up before them. You will see them grovel and slink away like so many disobedient dogs. Have no fear, dearest. Jonifer Davos is master here. His word is law. They have never defied him before, nor will they defy him now."

Starcourt was not so sure of this, but he did not express his doubt to her.

"They believe they are right, Gerane," he said. "I am an usurper. I am their natural foe. I am taking from them their most precious treasure."

"Meaning me, I suppose? But you are not taking me from them, Gavan. Are we not to abide here with them to the end of our days?"

He did not answer. Casting an anxious glance over his shoulder through the open door, he said:

"Jonifer is still sitting in front of the fire, smoking his pipe. Gad, he is a cool one. He is taking his time about it."

"In his own good time," said she, calmly, "he will go down and speak to them. They will have to wait till he is ready."

Presently Jonifer called them into the house. He was still sitting with his legs outstretched, pipe in hand.

"Close the door," he said. "Come nearer. Before I go down to talk to the men, I want to impress upon you, Gerane, that I shall have but six loyal friends in that ugly horde. Broadaxe and Crispo and Gratz,—I need not name them all. You know who I mean. I think I can count on Peter, also. Joseph and Matthew, no. Now, you know what it is they are demanding. Your mind is made up, my dear, and so is mine. However, if you are disposed even now to change it, I will be governed by your decision. If you say so, I will tell them that the wedding is not to take place, that you are content to abide by the will of the majority and give up all thought of marrying—"

She interrupted him. "You may tell them, father, that I shall marry Gavan Starcourt on the fifteenth of March if we both are alive at that time," she said firmly.

"I suppose you realize that it is not you they will put to death in order to stop the wedding," said Jonifer slowly.

"Yes, I know," she murmured, suddenly putting her hand to her breast. After a moment she lifted her head and faced Starcourt. Her eyes were dark with dread, but her voice was calm and steady. "Up to this moment, Gavan, I have not been afraid. But my father would not have spoken as he did unless there was a reason. He means that they will—they will kill you—if we—" Her voice failed her.

Starcourt put his arm around her, drawing her close. He addressed Jonifer, however.

"A few months ago, Jonifer, I would have said it serves you right for bringing all this upon yourself. But not now. Gerane has changed all that. You served me better than you knew when you trussed me up and dragged me here—to her. And so you may say this for me to your friends out there: the only way to keep me from being her husband if she will have me is to kill me."

"Oh, Gavan!"

Jonifer was silent for a moment. "I shall also say to them, Starcourt, that they will have to kill me while they are about it," he said, holding out his hand. "And I can promise them," he went on grimly, "that the task of killing Jonifer Davos will not be a happy one. My authority here is at stake. There is only one way for them to override it. My purpose in speaking to you as I have is simply to assure myself that Gerane wishes to go ahead with the wedding as planned. I am not considering you, Starcourt. Your wishes in the matter are of no consequence to me. Gerane wants you, so there is nothing more to be said about it. And now, daughter, here is a pistol. It is a small one, as you see, but it is as deadly as one thrice

as big. Take it, my child. These are troublous, uncertain hours. Keep it where you can always put your hand upon it. If the time should come when you have neither father nor lover to protect you,—well, I am your father and I love you, so it is not for me to advise you what to do with it. But"—and here he arose, the smile of a confident swaggerer on his lips—"we must not cry before we are hurt. I go now to twist the dragon's tail. It shall see that I am not afraid of it. Be of good cheer, Gerane,—but stay indoors."

He was getting into his fur coat.

"See here, Jonifer," began Starcourt earnestly, "you would better take me along with you. The one thing that seems to disturb them more than all others is the belief that I may one day succeed you as leader here. I would like to assure them that these fears are groundless. Nothing on God's earth could induce me to turn thief and outlaw. If they—"

"If I need you I will send Julius Broadaxe to summon you," said Jonifer curtly.

He was at the door when Gerane cried out.

"Are you not taking your pistols with you, father?"

"These men are my friends, daughter," said he, in some surprise. "There will be no shooting to-night. Time enough for that between now and the fifteenth," he added, sententiously.

He went out, closing the door behind him. They saw him stride across the strip of light shed by the window and disappear into the darkness beyond.

The assembled group received him in silence. He walked straight to the shed and faced them, the light from the forge behind him. Without a moment's hesitation, he began, his voice raised a little to carry to the outer rim of listeners:

"The first question to be settled here to-night concerns me alone. If there is one among you who is willing to step forward and accuse me of disloyalty, let him do so."

He waited for a reply, his eyes ranging the circle of dark, sinister faces. Julius Broadaxe spoke.

"I am not in accord with the rest, Jonifer, but I take it upon myself to speak for all. No one questions your loyalty. Am I right, men?"

There was a gruff chorus of approval.

"And yet," said Jonifer, coldly, "you are assembled here to question my motives. Let us get down to the business at once. You have a spokesman. Let him stand forth and present his grievance. I know what it is, but we will understand each other better if the matter is put into plain terms in the presence of all. I am a man of few words, as you know. Let your spokesman be brief. Come! Stand forth, Jan Melby, if you are the one selected."

Melby advanced to within a few yards of the stalwart chieftain.

"I have been chosen, Jonifer," said he, his voice clear and steady. "I speak first for every man in this crowd. We are your friends. We are content with your leadership. We have no grudge against you. Let that be understood, Jonifer."

"It is," said the chieftain, impatiently.

"But we are almost as one man in opposing the marriage of your daughter and the man she frankly describes as her 'beloved enemy.' I will be brief. It is our intention to prevent it by what we call fair means but which to you may seem foul. In short, Jonifer Davos, this marriage is not to take place. We will not permit it. I speak for all save six or eight men. We are nearly fifteen to one, and we are determined. This man Starcourt is a prisoner here among us. He was bent on destroying us. His hand is against us now and always will be. Why, therefore, should we stand silent and allow our enemy to be rewarded? No man could ask for a greater reward than that which is to be bestowed upon him,—the hand

of Gerane and all that goes with it. What have you to say, Jonifer?"

Jonifer took his time about answering. Once more his gaze swept the throng.

"Gerane is my daughter," he said at last. "Have I ever questioned the right of any father here to give his daughter in marriage to whomsoever he chooses?"

"No father among us has given his daughter to an enemy, and that you know full well," said Jan.

"Call Starcourt an enemy, if it pleases you. He is a gentleman, he is in love with my daughter and she with him. He is our prisoner. He can never leave this valley alive without our consent. You all knew what my intentions were when I went out with some of you and made a captive of him. I brought him here with but a single thought in mind. If things turned out as I wished and hoped, Gerane would fall in love with him and they would be married whether he was willing or not. It has fallen out as I desired. Therefore, my friends, I shall give my daughter to the man of her choice. I can tell by your faces that you have an alternative to propose. Out with it!"

"We expected you to take this stand," said Melby loudly. "We know you well enough for that. It compels us to state our position clearly, once and for all. We ask you to deliver Starcourt over to us peaceably within the next twenty-four hours. If you refuse to accept this offer, it is our intention to take him by force. We give you twenty-four hours in which to decide the—"

"I do not need twenty-four seconds, my friends," broke in Jonifer, ruthlessly. "I have already decided. Now, I make the same proposition to you. I will give you twenty-four hours in which to change your minds. If at the end of that time you are still determined to take him by force, you will find him at my house. But I warn you now that you will

have to kill me first. Either I am the chieftain here or I am nobody. Well, I would sooner be a dead chieftain than a living nobody."

There was dead silence for a few moments. Then Broad-axe stepped forth.

"You may count me as a loyal friend, Jonifer," he said. "If there are others here, let them stand forth that we may see how many are willing to die for Jonifer Davos. At the same time, Jan Melby, you may count the number of friends you may have to kill."

Seven men promptly joined him. There was no hesitation. These men, and all the others, for that matter,—were not afraid of death. But the seven held their heads a little higher than all the rest. Peter was one of them. Jonifer's voice rang out.

"There is one more thing I have to say to all of you, including these men who are here beside me. It has been stated that it is in my mind to have Gavan Starcourt take my place when my days are done. You are saying that my daughter's husband is to succeed me. Nothing could be farther from the truth. You want the truth. Well, you shall have it. It is my wish and always has been,—and well you know,—that one day my daughter shall go out into the world and take her place among its people. She is not one of us at heart. She does not belong here with us. I look forward to the day when she may go forth as the wife of an honest gentleman. That day may be far off,—years away, I have no doubt. Of one thing you may be sure, as I shall be sure, myself, Colonel Starcourt will never leave this place until he gives his word of honor not to betray us,—or his wife. And if he gives his word of honor I shall accept it. We give our word of honor never to betray each other, and we have died rather than violate it. His word is as good as ours. I bring you a message from him. If it is your will to have him come

before you now and repeat it, I will send for him. Not half an hour ago he told me to tell you that no power on God's earth is strong enough to make a robber and an outlaw of him. There you have it,—in his own words. And now you shall have my decision. My daughter and Gavan Starcourt are to become man and wife on the fifteenth of March. The day is set. You have come here to throw the gauntlet into the ring. I pick it up and throw it back to you. So now we understand each other. I am either Jonifer the Hawk or Jonifer the Worm."

"Yes!" shouted Jan Melby. "Now we understand each other, Jonifer Davos. We know where we stand. If by to-morrow at this time, you still refuse to abide by the will of the majority, we shall come for Starcourt and we will not go away without him. You can save his life,—and perhaps your own, for God knows we would not do you harm,—you can save his life by turning him over to us. We will agree to spare his life. We pledge that very thing. But after to-morrow he earns his bread by toiling in the fields and forest, as our prisoner, not yours, and he will never speak to your daughter again except as a slave."

"Once more I say to you that I am either Jonifer the Hawk or Jonifer the Worm," shouted the chieftain, and without another word whirled and strode away.

He heard the mutterings, then the shouts and execrations, but he did not turn his head. On entering his house, he said to Starcourt:

"You will spend the night in this house, Colonel."

And from the grim, terse injunction they gathered volumes. Gerane came at once to his side.

"They have defied you, father?" she asked, tremulously.

"On the contrary, I have defied them," said he, casting aside his coat and cap. He held out his hands to the fire and rubbed them.

"What is it they demand, Jonifer?" This from Starcourt, who had paled.

"They want you, Starcourt," replied the other.

"To—to kill?" cried Gerane, horrified.

He laid his hand upon her brown, wavy hair and caressed it lovingly. "Not so bad as that, my girl. They would make a slave of him and work him in the fields with ass and oxen for the rest of his days."

Her face brightened a little. "But I would be happy to work in the fields with him if—"

"That is not a part of their plan. He is to slave alone and you can never speak to him again."

She gave out a sharp, hysterical laugh. "And you—you will permit them to do this?" she cried.

"Did I not say to you that I have defied them?"

"See here," broke in Starcourt, straightening himself to his full height, "am I to have no word in this? I know what this means to you, Jonifer. Save yourselves. Turn me over to them. That is the only way to spare—"

"Damn you, Starcourt? Are you a coward?" grated Jonifer.

"A coward?" cried the young man, flushing. "Give me a pistol and a sword and see if I am a coward. I will go among them now and—"

"I beg your pardon. I spoke too quickly and without thought. What I should have said is this: Do you think I am a coward? Turn you over to them? Take you away from Gerane? Feed my daughter's lover to the swine? Ho! Is that what you call defiance? Come now, draw up your bench to the fire and sit down. A pipe, my friend, and a flagon of ale,—as fine a brew as ever came from the Inn of the Hawk and Raven,— Come, come, Gerane! Pinch your cheeks if that be the only way to put color into them. Do not look like a sick kitten. Bid Matilde to join us. Tell

Rosa to draw two flagons of ale and fetch them at once. A bottle of wine as well for our ladies in distress. Then sit you here beside the cause of all the trouble, the noble Count Maris-Starcourt. Bear you well in mind, my girl, that before many days have passed you will be a Countess,—aye, and I will see to it that every mother's dog of them out yonder addresses you as 'my lady.' Come! Be sprightly, girl."

He laughed uproariously. They took heart from his boastful good humor.

"Now you do believe, father, that Gavan and I are—are to be married?" she cried, her brow clearing.

"Pray how is it possible for you to become a Countess unless you marry a Count?" he countered. "Run along now. And hurry back."

She stopped half way to the door and listened.

"Hear them! They have been yelling and shouting like that for some time. Oh, do you suppose they have reconsidered—do you think they are cheering, father?"

"It is of no consequence whether they growl or whine," replied Jonifer, taking up his pipe and pouch. "It all comes to the same end when the master speaks. And I have spoken. Light up, your lordship!"

No sooner had Gerane left the room than his face sobered and a dark scowl replaced the smile. He waited a moment before speaking. The yells coming up from the distant forge seemed louder and fiercer. He lowered his voice.

"We may as well eat, drink and be merry, Starcourt, for to-morrow we may,—now, how does your saying go?—for to-morrow we may be—oh, I have it! For to-morrow we may all be defunct! Ho! Ho!"

CHAPTER XVI

BELEAGUERED

EARLY the next morning Julius Broadaxe appeared at Jonifer's house. He carried two rifles and pouches of ammunition. Rosa opened the door, holding her finger to her lips to enjoin silence. But Broadaxe, red-eyed and troubled of mien, was not to be silenced.

"Do not hush me, woman," he exclaimed loudly. "Out of the way, I say. I must speak with Jonifer at once. Now, curse me,—is he still abed?" He pushed past her into the big room. There he stopped with a jerk to blink in astonishment. The early morning light was dull, but it was strong enough for him to make out the figure of a man sitting in a chair over by the fireplace. Sitting is hardly the word, for Jonifer's long frame had slumped down into the chair, his legs were outstretched, and his chin was on his chest. He was snoring lustily.

"Asleep!" wheezed Julius in a vast effort to bring his voice to a whisper.

"And why not?" demanded Rosa in a fierce undertone. "He was awake all night, I do believe." She closed the door softly. "Where are they, Julius? We heard them yelling and howling and making speeches till long past midnight. I looked out at daybreak and they were gone. Where are they now?" She was wringing her fat hands.

"Shut up!" commanded the smith, unfeelingly. He was regarding Jonifer with frowning, troubled eyes, pulling nervously at his beard. Suddenly he started and peered in-

tently into a dark corner beyond the sleeping chieftain. Lying on a pile of rugs was the figure of a man, also sound asleep. He had no difficulty in recognizing Starcourt. "Oho! So he is here, is he? If I wasn't expecting to die fighting before the day is gone I could die laughing now when I think of those fellows guarding an empty house all night." He chuckled under his breath. His brow darkened again. This time he leaned close to Rosa and whispered: "A word of advice to you, woman. Leave this house at once and seek shelter elsewhere. Take Eljie with you. Lose no time. Go at once, else you will be trapped here and—"

"Oh, the saints preserve—"

"Do not argue," broke in the smith. "Off with you! But wait! Where is Gerane?"

"In—in there," gulped Rosa, shaking like a leaf. "She and—and Matilde. Am I—am I to wake her and take her with me, Julius?"

"Certainly not."

As the servant hurried away, he strode over and shook Jonifer's shoulder. Instantly the chieftain was awake. He sprang to his feet and lurched toward the two heavy pistols that were lying close at hand on a stool.

"Oh, it is you, Julius?" he exclaimed, blinking. "Well,—what now? Was I asleep? Curse me for a fool,—was I asleep?"

"You were, and snoring. Any one could have walked in here and robbed the house with the greatest ease."

"Starcourt laid down at two o'clock. I was to—"

"Rouse him!" commanded Julius.

Without a word, Jonifer walked over and nudged the sleeper with the toe of his boot,—not gently, it must be said. Starcourt scrambled to his feet.

"What is in the air, Julius?" demanded Davos, turning to the newcomer.

The smith looked out of the window before answering.

"I see Peter and Jahn coming down the road,—aye, Strade and Mastil, too. You and I make six, Jonifer,—six all told. They took Gratz off with them last night. He will come in handy as a doctor in case—"

"And as an undertaker," snarled Jonifer, venomously. "They will need him, curse their thieving souls." He grabbed up his pistols as he hurried to the window.

"Candan and Horbitz have weakened. You cannot count on them, Jonifer. We six are all—"

"Are you not counting on me?" exclaimed Starcourt, angrily. "Damn you, Broadaxe, do you think I am going to sit here with my hands folded—"

"We will see about that," interposed Jonifer. "But what are we to expect, Julius? Out with it! Are they coming here to surround the house and—"

"I know their plans. They made no effort to keep them from us. Inside of an hour, Jonifer, they will be out here in front, two score of them. As you know, Jan Melby set a time limit last night. They intend to abide by the bargain they made with you. Some of them were for going to Starcourt's cabin last night to drag him out. But Jan and the rest were against it." Here he grinned at Starcourt. "Half a dozen of them have been watching your cabin since midnight, Colonel. At noon, Jonifer, these first forty or fifty men will be relieved by as many more. At sunset they will all be here. There will be no attack before that time. But if the man they want is not delivered over to them before the sun goes down,—well, you know without my telling you, Jonifer, that there is not a coward among them. I leave you to *guess* what will happen."

"They will attack?"

"As sure as my name is Snook," replied the smith.

"Do you mean to tell me," cried Starcourt, "that they are

going to stand out there in front all day long and do nothing? Merely wait out there in the cold like—like silly asses?"

"More like vultures," said Julius sententiously.

"Asses, I say. What is the sense of it? I cannot escape. I could not get away if I tried. If they—"

"They are not such fools as you think, Colonel. Ask yourself what effect it may have on Jonifer Davos if he sits here in his house all day and sees fifty, yes, a hundred armed men, —waiting for a certain hour to strike. They do not want to kill their leader. They do not want to storm this house unless it is necessary. And they hope that Jonifer will change his mind before sundown if he looks all day long at—sure death."

Jonifer threw up his head and laughed.

"Death will walk among them for awhile before he comes to me," he said. "But now that you have warned me, my good friend, depart at once. Turn back Jahn and the others. I shall not change my mind. Let them find but three dead bodies here when they cross my threshold. Nothing is to be gained by piling up five or six more, Julius, so—"

Julius Broadaxe swore mightily. He was in the midst of a violent upheaval of mingled surprise and wrath when Gerane came swiftly into the room, followed by Matilde. Both were fully dressed, Gerane in her brown hunting breeches and dark green tunic. She was booted but hatless.

"Rosa and Eljie have just left, father," she said hurriedly. "I shall cook breakfast and Matilde will serve it in this room. Have you had yours, Julius?"

Julius was speechless. He fingered the butts of the pistols in his sash, as if for succor. While Jonifer was regarding his daughter with a proud smile on his lips, Starcourt sprang to her side and threw his arm about her shoulders.

"Good God! I cannot stand this. Hand me over to them at once, Jonifer. I would die a hundred deaths rather than see her—"

"You need your coffee, Gavan," said she, putting her hand over his mouth. She was smiling. "No man is sensible till he has had his coffee. Father is a growling bear and Julius' wife tells everybody that he is a vicious ogre and would swallow children whole if they came near him before breakfast. Oh, dear! And here are others! Friends or foes?"

Crispo and Peter came hurrying up to the door with Strade and Mastil. All save Peter were well along in years. For twenty years and more they had ridden the Highway with Jonifer Davos; to them he was a god. Now they were come on foot to walk with him straight into the Valley of Death if needs be.

"It is all over," shouted Crispo, as he entered the house. "They have just broken into the cabin down the road and by this time have killed or captured—" His startled gaze fell upon Starcourt. "You here! Then they have not—" He leaped to the door and cast a single glance down the road. "Quick! Bolt the doors and windows. They are running this way,—a dozen of them."

Instantly the little group leaped to action. The thick, sturdy doors were slammed and bolts dropped into place; into each of the four window casements at the back of the house two blocks of wood four inches thick were thrust and securely fastened. Up to this moment these blocks had rested undisturbed for years, peaceful, innocent-looking shelves, each under its own aperture. Nearly every house in the valley was provided with these "stop-blocks," as they were called, in anticipation of an attack and siege by armed forces of the law. Jonifer's "castle," more substantially built than all the others, could be transformed at a moment's notice into a veritable fortress, secure against anything short of cannon.

He refused to have the front windows closed.

"I would not have them think that I am afraid to look them

in the face," he explained grimly. "But, curse me if I want to be shot in the back."

A small knot of men gathered in the road below the house. They had just come from the ransacked cabin. Jonifer, disdaining opposition, threw open the door and shouted scornfully:

"So this is the way you live up to your bargain, is it? There is some difference between six o'clock in the morning and six at night, you scurvy swine. Well, the man you want is here. Thank the good Lord, I did not trust to your honor."

He slammed the door upon a chorus of shouts and curses.

"Now, we will see about breakfast," he said, turning to Gerane and her companion. "Julius, do you and Strade go to the kitchen and stand guard. Peter, go at once to the stable and tend the beasts. They must not suffer for want of feed and water. No one will interfere. Take your time."

Crispo interposed. "Jan will attend to them, Jonifer. They have no quarrel with your cattle."

"Do as I tell you, Peter," commanded Jonifer sharply. "Leave your weapons here, my boy. You will not need them."

Peter was unbolting the rear door when Gerane called out to him to give Selim carrots from the bin.

"And curry and brush him, too, Peter," she added, wistfully. "I suppose those stable boys have gone off without giving him a thought."

Starcourt marveled not a little. This *was* playing with fire,—and under fire, at that. Suddenly it occurred to him that these people did not know the meaning of fear. He would have followed her to the kitchen but for Jonifer's peremptory command to remain where he was. Dropping into a chair he dejectedly, even sullenly, eyed the chieftain, Crispo and Mastil as they proceeded to converse in undertones

over by one of the windows, out of which they gazed and sometimes pointed. He was boiling within. They were treating him as if he were a child. A nice position for a soldier to be in! An officer of the famous Duke's Dragoons at that,—the commander of a whole regiment of men,—shunted off into a corner and ignored! But what could he do? He was a prisoner. A bit of property to be defended, that was all!

Matilde came in from the kitchen directly and began setting the table for the company. Starcourt watched her gloomily as she went unconcernedly about the business of getting down plates and cups and cutlery from the shelves in the cupboard and placing them in position. Jonifer and his two companions paid no attention to her. She stopped and spoke to him once in passing.

"This is their affair, Colonel Starcourt. I know them well. It is not you that Jonifer is thinking about. He will fight them,—yes, perhaps, he may die,—but it will not be for you, nor even for Gerane. His own power is at stake. He is a terrible man, Colonel Starcourt,—a terrible and a valiant man. If he had a hundred lives to give he would give them all before he would give even so much as an inch to these men who have challenged him. Twice before, to my knowledge, he has beaten down rebellion here. He killed the rebels as he would have killed snakes. Life would be nothing to him if—"

"But, damn him, he ought to think of Gerane," grated Starcourt. "He sends her out to the kitchen where—where she isn't safe from—"

"She is as safe there as anywhere," she assured him. "No one will molest her—yet. God alone knows what the close of day may have in store for all of us, but that is twelve hours away, my friend, and for that long at least, Jonifer Davos is lord and master here. I hate him but I have faith in him.

More than that, since you came I am beginning to have faith in God once more. Something tells me that God, moving in His mysterious way, will— But enough of this! Gerane will take my head off if the coffee is delayed a second. She is the most appalling cutthroat of them all." She said this with a fond smile as she hastened away to the kitchen.

The seven men were eating breakfast when Jan Melby and some forty-odd men took up their station in the road below Jonifer's dooryard. Gerane, rosy-cheeked and warm after her unaccustomed toiling over the stone oven, was helping Matilde serve the watchful yet hungry group. She glanced out of the window and was the first to see the besiegers.

"Here they are," she announced a trifle shrilly. Then she added, with a fine show of disdain: "And they look as if they haven't had any coffee. I've never seen so many sour faces."

A thought struck Jonifer,—and evidently it was a happy one, for he leaned back and laughed uproariously.

"I have it," he cried. "They are thirsty. They smell the blood of an English-mun! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

Whereupon Broadaxe gave vent to his thunderous mirth, and was joined with gusto by the other four. Starcourt, disconcerted, managed a smile.

"For shame!" cried Gerane, furiously. "Have you no manners? Is it a thing to laugh about?" She stamped her foot. "You—you *cowards!*"

This sobered them. Even Jonifer looked crestfallen.

"Now, sink me in hell, Gerane," he boomed, "can't we have our little joke? Are we to—"

"I fail to see the joke," she broke in, icily.

"Let them enjoy themselves, Gerane," cried Starcourt, actually feeling sorry for the jovial rogues. "Can't you see how your wonderful coffee has cheered every last one of us?"

"Besides," interposed Matilde, "think how envious Jan Melby and his crowd must be, my dear, to hear us laughing

with such enormous glee while they are cooling their heels out there in the snow."

The day advanced. While the patient besiegers came and went with grim, unyielding constancy, and without a single manifestation of active hostility, Jonifer and his friends engaged in a long, fruitless argument over the decision of the latter to remain in the house until the bitter end. The leader pleaded with them to go; he commanded and even threatened, but to no avail. Gerane added her entreaties, begging them to save themselves while there was yet time. Matilde, stonily silent, looked from time to time at the portrait of Louise over the fireplace; if her eyes could have spoken they would have asked Jonifer how he liked being at the mercy of robbers and hell-hounds.

"You have wives and children," argued Jonifer, wrathfully. "Go home to them. I do not need you. I prefer to stand alone against them. It is my wish. If the worst should come and they storm the house, would six of us be able to hold them back? No! Go home, friends. I am grateful to you all but—"

"I have a wife," growled Broadaxe. "But do you know what she would do to me if I deserted you now, Jonifer? She would tear me limb from limb—and, curse me, I would not have the heart to resist."

The picture of wee Mrs. Snook tearing the brawny Hercules limb from limb would have been an amusing one at any other time, but now no one smiled. He was merely illustrating the story that was at the back of each man's mind. That is to say, all save Peter.

"I have no wife," said he, gruffly. "I am your nephew, Uncle Jonifer,—I am of your blood. I hate Starcourt. If it were left to me I would deliver him over to them at once. But it is not for me to say. I have been brought up to look upon you as my chieftain. It is our blood that rules this

place, call it what you will. So I shall stand by you and uphold the Davos rule so long as there is a breath of life in my body. And, sir, should you meet with death and I am left, I shall continue to fight Jan Melby. He seeks to be chieftain here. I look upon myself as your rightful successor. I am a Davos. There is only one way for Jan Melby to become chieftain, and that is by killing me. Once and for all, Uncle Jonifer, I shall serve you as long as I live. If you die before I do,—well, that is another matter."

He cast a glance at Gerane that betrayed the very soul of him. For the first time in her life she shuddered before Peter. Her hand went to the pistol hidden in the loose bosom of her tunic. Somehow it comforted her.

Late in the afternoon, Jonifer opened a great brass-bound chest that stood at the lower end of the room. He was about to take something from its interior when suddenly it occurred to him to count the rifles, pistols and the piles of cartridges, shot, powder and caps that had been collected for the defense of the house. From cupboards and chests he and his men had produced quite a formidable arsenal; some fifteen rifles, as many pistols of various shapes and age, a few swords and ugly looking dirks.

"We have a goodly number of deaths ready for delivery," was his comment as he twisted his long mustache prinkingly. Then he stooped and after fumbling a moment drew from the chest a gleaming, gorgeously jeweled scimitar. Gerane, who had never seen the weapon before, uttered a cry of admiration; the others exclaimed.

"This blade," said Jonifer, "was made in Constantinople over a hundred years ago for the first Duke of Droon, my great-grandfather, whose picture hangs in the house where you have been living, Colonel Starcourt. His father, the ruler of Graustark in that day, had scimitars made for his two sons, Prince Caspar and his half-brother, the young Duke.

They were exactly alike, so it is said. One of them is still in the castle at Edelweiss, the other is here in the hand of Jonifer Davos, who, if destiny had not played the devil with his ends, might to-day be—well, other than he is. If anything should happen to me, Gerane, this blade is yours; and if you should have sons let it be given to the first-born, not in my name but in that of the Droon whose head was cut off by command of his brother. And here, my friends, in this box of beaten gold are the decorations and jewels that belonged to my great-grandfather."

He took the casket from the depths of the chest, opened it and revealed its contents to the eager, astonished group.

(Outside Jan Melby's men were shouting as they drank of the raw but warming liquor that was being handed about among them by compassionate wives! Wives who had begun to fear not for the men themselves but for their courage!)

There was the great fire-gleaming cluster of rubies that Starcourt had gazed upon for many days in the portrait of the young Duke,—a magnificent thing, indeed. Besides, there were rings and armlets, jewel-handled daggers, boxes of alabaster and jet, a cross studded with diamonds, a huge osmanic crescent composed of precious stones of several varieties, a goblet of pure gold with a royal crest done in rubies on its side, and other orders and decorations of the House of Ganlook. Last of all, he held up to view a rolled sheet of parchment.

"The crown proclamation establishing the Duchy of Droon in 1761, and the granting or certain territory in the northeast part of Graustark to the second son of his Serene Highness, to belong to him and his male heirs in perpetuity," announced Jonifer, with a sneer. "It is not worth *this*," and he snapped his thumb and finger. "But it is something to keep as a souvenir, Gerane. My great-grandmother succeeded in getting out of Edelweiss with her baby son and all these things.

They came down to my father and then to me, just as you see them. I have no male heir, so it pleases me to bequeath them to my daughter. You need not despise them, Gerane. They are not stolen goods. They belong to the Droons, such as we are, respectfully and honorably. The same may be said of your own mother's jewels and garments. They were hers, not mine. I did not steal them for her. So you are quite rich in your own right, my child. But if you had all the gems in the world you would still be poor as long as you remain in this hole in the hills. To-morrow, if all goes well, you will return my property to me. These things are mine until I die. After that—well. There is no Duke of Droon to sport them but, just the same, they will prove an interesting legacy for your son, Gerane."

Through all this Peter's eyes were glassy. At the end they went swiftly, greedily to Gerane's averted face. Matilde was watching him. His lips moved but no words issued from them. Nevertheless, she sensed them—and correctly. To himself he was saying: "For *my* son,—all these things for *my* son."

The sun was dropping behind the peaks when Jonifer threw open the front door and boldly faced the swarm of rebels. There had been angry, taunting shouts, and a great brandishing of swords and pistols up to the moment of his appearance. All unknown to Melby and his mob, men inside the house stood ready to seal up the front windows with thick blocks of wood, in each of which there was a slit wide enough to allow the defenders to aim and fire their guns with comparatively little risk to themselves.

Jonifer, standing on his doorstep, held up his hand. His head was high and his voice rang clear with the challenging note of a fearless warrior. Instantly the shouting ceased. Two hundred evil eyes were upon the chieftain.

"The time is about up," shouted Jonifer, sweeping the

group with a lordly, arrogant eye. He knew that a score of men were in the stable yard at the back of the house, so raised his voice that it might be heard by those who were invisible to him. "In a very few minutes the sun will be down and the time I granted you will be over. I gave you till sunset to change your minds. What have you to say, Jan Melby? Stand forth!"

His words did not come as a surprise to them. They knew him too well for that. There was not a man among them who expected Jonifer Davos to falter, and there was not one who did not respect and admire him. Never was such a leader as he, nor lived there a man who could fill his place. But the die was cast.

Jan Melby stood forward. "You are wrong, Jonifer," he cried. "It is we who set the time. We gave you till sunset to deliver us the man we want. Are you ready to hand him over to us?"

"Before I answer that question, Jan, I want to say to all of you that I am your friend, that I would die for any one of you if needs be. I have tried to be just and fair,—if sometimes harsh,—and I have led you for many years as best I knew how. You have prospered under my hand and rule. Together we have ridden the highway and the forest, knee to knee, shoulder to shoulder, and we have trusted each other. It grieves me to think that I shall have to kill friends in order to make the rest of you understand that I am still your leader and shall be till God says it is time for me to die. Now I answer your question, Jan. I do not intend to deliver Colonel Starcourt over to you. If you want him, you must come and take him. But I warn you all, this is my castle. I shall defend it and all that it contains. And so I say farewell to those of you who are about to die!"

He stepped quickly into the house and the heavy door was slammed,—just in time to receive half a dozen bullets. The

bolts fell, the window blocks were slung into place, and the siege was on.

"Stoop!" commanded Jonifer. "Keep your heads below the windows. There are men out there who can put nine bullets out of ten through a knot-hole at a hundred paces. We are safer here than they are, however, mind you that. They cannot get in. They cannot break down these doors except at an awful cost. Those few shots were fired, not to kill me, but to show that they are in earnest. We know them well, eh, Julius? A braver lot of men never walked the earth than those devils out there. Come, all of you, sit down. Have you brought all of the provisions and water in from the kitchen, Gerane?"

"Yes, father," answered the girl steadily, her nostrils quivering, her eyes ablaze with the light of battle. "We have enough here to last for days."

Starcourt, his heart swelling, strode up to Jonifer and laid his hands on his shoulders.

"You are the bravest man I've ever known," he cried. Then he groaned: "And the damnedest fool, as well."

"Well," said Jonifer, speculatively, squinting an eye as if to give the matter deep consideration, "I've never seen a brave man yet who wasn't a fool, Colonel Starcourt. On the other hand, I've never seen a fool who was brave. Now, make what you can out of that."

Broadaxe turned away from one of the windows through which he had been peeping obliquely.

"There are a few wise men out there," he remarked. "It looks to me as if some of them have horse sense. They are splitting up, quite a lot of them going around to the rear. That means they intend to attack from both sides. They know we cannot man all of these windows at once. If a few of them can get up to one of the windows it will be easy to pick us off without much—"

Jonifer's laugh interrupted him. "Even you think I am a fool, Julius," he cried, and strode over to one of the blocked windows. In a second's time he had covered the slit with a thick iron bar, completely closing the aperture. This bar was held securely in place by huge iron hooks that up to now had been hidden by the curtains they were cunningly devised to support. (These bits of rare brocade, by the way, had been cut with ruthless but clever hands from gorgeous hangings that might then be adorning the windows of a Russian Grand Duke's palace had they passed over the King's Highway in safety.) He went swiftly to the other windows and performed a similar act. Then he darted into Gerane's room, returning a moment or two later.

"They may shoot all night into those cracks, Julius, without hitting anything but good, hard iron. Now, then, do you and Peter cover the cracks in the front windows and we will all sit down and wait while Gerane prepares for us one of her excellent suppers. A fresh log or two on the fire, Peter. The spits and fiddles, Jahn. I fear me the wine and ale will be warm— Ha! What is that? Horses in the stable yard?"

Broadaxe lifted one of the bars and peered out into the darkening lot.

"As I thought," said he. "They are taking your beasts away to feed them and to get them out of the path of wild bullets. I call that decent of them, Jonifer."

"Aye, they love horses," said Davos, rather wistfully.

Gerane was immeasurably relieved. "I have been worrying all day about the horses," she said, as if that was the gravest of her anxieties.

They were gathered about the table making a hearty meal of the unhappily burnt meats that Gerane had roasted over the fire, praising it with great gallantry, when a loud voice was heard outside shouting Jonifer's name.

"That is Jan Melby," said the chieftain, arising and going

to one of the windows. "What do you want, Jan? Be brief. We are at supper," he bawled.

"It is eight o'clock," replied Melby. "We have decided to give you till to-morrow morning, Jonifer Davos. We are not fools. We know what it would mean to try to break into your house. To-morrow morning we shall set fire to it. That will bring you all into the open—unless you wish to roast alive. Good night! We leave you to your pleasant dreams."

Jonifer smiled as he rejoined his companions.

"He does not pull the wool over my eyes," he said. "If he hopes to catch me off my guard he will find himself mistaken. We do not sleep this night, my friends. They will go away now, but they will steal back some time between now and midnight to catch us napping, and they will bring battering rams. We will be waiting for them. Luck is with us. There will be a moon to-night. Ho! Ho! How would you like to be carrying a battering ram as big as yon fire log and ten times as long, on a moonlight night, Gerane? Ho! Ho! Ho! I will wager you would drop it albeit you appear to be a hardy young stripling, my dear. Come! Let us finish our feast and then think of less agreeable tasks."

Gerane blushed scarlet as her eyes went to Starcourt and were quickly turned away. For the first time in her life, perhaps, she was self-conscious. A hardy young stripling! Suddenly she longed for skirts.

Jonifer's prediction was a correct one. It must have been eleven o'clock when Peter, watching through one of the slits, witnessed the enlargement of the comparatively small company in the roadway, a number of men emerging from the murk. They came silently, cautiously, and their movements were swift. He had no difficulty in making out the long tree trunks, three of them, each manned by a dozen stout fellows.

There were no lights in the room. A fitful glow from the

fireplace was all that relieved the darkness in which Jonifer and his friends waited. At Peter's call they sprang to the windows with pistol and gun. All of the slits were open. The defenders could see without being seen.

"Do not wait!" commanded Jonifer in a hoarse undertone. "The time for parleying is over. Shoot to kill! Don't let them reach the door with those logs!"

The first ram was on its way toward the house when five shots rang out. Five men released their hold on the log and went sprawling to the ground. A second volley from the windows and three men fell. The ram went down with them, pinning two of the bodies to the snow-packed earth. An instant later half a hundred rifles roared, spitting flame and bullet toward the house. The second ram was started. Again the deadly guns from within cut down the leaders and the log was dropped.

"Watch the stableyard!" roared Jonifer, and three men rushed to the rear windows.

Starcourt had snatched up a rifle. He leaped to Jonifer's side and was poking the muzzle through the aperture when the leader, with an oath, flung him aside.

"You are not to shoot at my men!" shouted this amazing, incomprehensible man. "Stand away! Put down that gun! This is between Jonifer Davos and his friends. I will not allow an enemy to take the life of a single man out there."

"Oh, my God!" gasped Starcourt, utterly dumbfounded. "Do you mean to say—"

Gerane's hand was on his arm, her lips close to his ear.

"Come away, Gavan!" she cried, shrilly. "Can't you understand? He does not want you to fire a shot. He wants to say when this is all over and they are beaten that you did not take a single life."

"But, my God,—haven't I the right to defend you, Gerane? Haven't I—"

"My father has spoken," she interrupted, with finality. "He is a great man, Gavan. He plays his own game fairly. No man can say otherwise."

Jonifer looked over his shoulder. "Defend yourself, Starcourt, when they fall upon you. We do not ask for the crown's help now," he cried. He fired again. "That was Olger Trane, I could take my oath," he said calmly. "Stand away from the window, both of you. It's hailing bullets out of a clear sky."

Broadaxe and two of the men were shooting from the rear windows. The former called out:

"They have dropped the log, Jonifer. Five of them down. The rest of them have found shelter in the stable sheds."

"Do not waste a shot," shouted Jonifer. "Hold your fire till you are sure of your man,—and keep away from the crack except when you are ready to shoot."

Gerane and Matilde, crouching, carried freshly charged weapons from man to man. The room was full of smoke and the smell of burnt powder. Scores of bullets were imbedded in the thick timbers of the doors and in the window blocks. There were inner and outer doors in both entrances, by the way, the former being closed only in winter time. It was quite three inches thick, the outer one being somewhat lighter and more easily swung on its hinges. And more than one bullet had found a crack in the window blocks, burying itself in the opposite wall.

The firing outside began to die down. Jonifer, peering cautiously, uttered a cry of satisfaction.

"They've got their bellies full for a while," he announced. "Some twelve or fifteen of them have had their last meal. It was of lead. The rest of them are falling back to a safe distance. They've had enough of it for the present. How does your English saying go, Colonel Starcourt? 'What

fools these mortals be?' I must take up Shakespeare when I—"

A furious, unexpected volley was fired at this instant by the retreating rebels,—as a parting reminder that the battle was by no means over and would be resumed when it suited the pleasure of the blockaders. The thud of many bullets striking the door and the face of the house smote the ears of those inside with an infinitely more venomous sound than the crack of the rifles themselves.

Something clattered to the floor over in one corner of the room, followed a second later by the crash of a heavy body. All eyes were turned in that direction. Jahn Crispo was lying on the floor, his legs jerking and twitching. Even as they looked he straightened them out and suddenly became very still and motionless.

Starcourt rushed over to him, dropping to his knees. Almost immediately he looked up and cried:

"They got him, Jonifer. He's dead!"

There was a hole in Crispo's forehead, through which blood was beginning to ooze.

"Poor old Jahn," gulped Davos, chokingly. "And it wasn't necessary, bless his soul. He could be alive now if he had obeyed me. Drop the bars over the cracks. They— But, hold! Before you do so,—laugh! Every one of you! Laugh as loudly as you can! Let them hear us laugh as if we were enjoying a huge joke."

All these cunning, amazing rascals raised their gruff, raucous voices in a roar of merriment that caused many a man outside to look at his neighbor in stark amazement and dismay!

There were no shrill, feminine voices in that gust of laughter. Gerane and Matilde had dropped to their knees, their hands over their eyes, and who knows what they were whispering through moving lips from which no sound issued?

Then the bars were lifted into place and the men came to

stand over Jahn Crispo. For a few moments they looked down upon him in silence. Then Broadaxe, heaving a deep sigh, stooped and grasped his ankles. As if he were a bag of grain, he dragged Jahn Crispo's body over to the end of the room, where it would be out of the way, and covered it with a rug.

"So!" was all he said.

Throughout the remainder of the night shots were fired at the house, but they were intermittent and without purpose save to let the occupants know that they were still surrounded by foes who could not be beaten off. Jonifer gave orders. The two women composed themselves on a pile of rugs over in one corner and, to Starcourt's astonishment, actually fell asleep. From where he sat he could see, but dimly, Gerane's powder-grimed face. She had smiled at him before closing her eyes. His heart was full. It was heavy. He would have given his soul to hold her in his arms, that she might sleep with her head on his shoulder.

"Lie down somewhere and get a little sleep, Colonel," said Jonifer, kindly.

"Sleep?" cried Gavan, bitterly. "Do you think I can sleep, Jonifer?"

"Have your own way about it," said the other. "I can and shall."

After giving instructions to those who were to keep the vigil for the next few hours, he calmly settled himself down in a chair and soon his head was nodding. At daybreak he called Gerane:

"Get up, my child. And you, Matilde. Bestir yourselves. Get the coffee to boiling, daughter. Three cups apiece, all around. Remember we are one man short," with a glance toward the foot of the room.

"Jan Melby said they would set fire to the house this morning," said Gerane, yawning and rubbing her eyes. "That

worried me a little before I could get to sleep. How will he do it? By shooting flaming arrows onto the roof?"

Jonifer laughed. "He is not such a fool. There must be ten inches of frozen snow on the roof. No, my dear, they will not set fire to the house. That was all a—what do you call it, Colonel?— Oh, yes,—a bluff."

While Matilde watched the big coffee pots, Gerane disappeared into her room. When she returned a few minutes later, only one with the most unnatural imagination would have described her as a "hardy stripling." She had got into a neat frock, washed the grime from her face, brushed her wavy hair and was so alluringly feminine that— But Broadaxe's words will suffice:

"That's more like it. Seems to me food always tastes better when it's cooked by a woman."

CHAPTER XVII

TAMMAS THE CELLARER AND—

A HORSEMAN was riding recklessly through the lofty cleft in the mountain to the south. From time to time he cast anxious, apprehensive glances over his shoulder into the gloom that seemed to be pursuing him. The gray dawn that by this time had begun to spread streaks and shadows over the white valley ahead and far above was still striving to find its way down to the bottom of the dark chasm. More than a thousand feet overhead ran a thin ribbon of bluish gray that was the sky, but the horseman far below rode through the pall of a stubborn darkness that still was night shut in and struggling. There was frost but little snow on the floor of the gigantic fissure; fierce winds, sweeping across the lofty opening, had allowed but little of their fleecy burden to sift down into the narrow cleft.

The rider, using the lash freely, urged his steed to a perilous speed notwithstanding the roughness of the path and the long, steady incline that tried both strength and wind. He paid little or no heed to the uneven, treacherous surface of the road; he cursed when the beast stumbled and slid down sharp declivities, and he swore harder still when it was forced to struggle slowly, with every muscle strained, up a steep rise in the floor of the gorge.

Thrice he drew rein to listen, his ear always turned to the black gulf that lay behind him. The last time he listened he distinctly heard the far-away sound of fire arms, muffled thuds like the popping of corn against the restraining cover of a hot saucepan. He was puzzled, and suddenly undecided.

Unless his ears deceived him, the shooting was on ahead of him instead of behind. From that time on he proceeded cautiously, his eyes and ears alert, every nerve aquiver. What was the meaning of all that shooting? Was he too late? Was there another way into the rock-bound dale?

Day was conquering the night. The pall was lifting. He could see far ahead now. Up there, a quarter of a mile away, was the gate in the mountain and beyond it lay the sunlit world that was crowding down into the gap to meet him.

The spent horse stumbled and fell. The horseman, certainly an inexperienced rider, went down with the animal, shooting off to the rock-strewn side of the road and landing on his head. He never knew how long he lay there stunned and unconscious; all he knew was that when he finally regained his senses and struggled to his feet night had turned to daylight and his horse, its head hanging and its body trembling, was standing near by, one leg limp and bleeding. He could see the bone sticking through the red-dripping foreleg, and his stomach turned.

He was an old man, was Tammas, the cellarer at Digman's Inn, and the sight of blood streaming from the leg of a horse was more than he could stand. Gore from a man's throat or belly,—that was nothing. He could stand a lot of that sort of thing without feeling the least bit squeamish. But this was terrible.

The horse looked at him. Tammas blubbered. He knew that they always shot horses when their legs were broken, but what could he do? He had neither pistol nor rifle with which to put the poor beast out of its suffering. And then he bethought himself to curse bitterly, not because he was powerless to kill the animal but because the animal was powerless to carry him the rest of the distance. It was still a good two miles to Jonifer's house and—

He cocked his ear suddenly, having noticed that the horse was pointing its ears down the gorge. The towering walls, acting as great sounding boards, brought to him the distant but unmistakable rumble of iron-shod hoofs. He looked about him in desperation. Unscalable cliffs on both sides! He was between two fires— Ah! It dawned upon his befuddled brain that very few shots were now being fired on there ahead. Now and then a crack,—yes, shots sure enough but far away and, to him comforting. He set off afoot, working his old legs with an agility that would have surprised him if he had not been thinking of something else. And this was no time, by the way, to be thinking about crippled horses.

The snow was deeper at the upper end of the crevasse, and the going most irksome until the chattering old man reached the wide, beaten path used by the guards Jonifer had posted in one of the little stone watch-towers to see that his prisoner did not approach the portal.

Tammas stopped short and blinked his watery eyes. Across the glaring white meadow he beheld a large number of fur-coated and hatted men scattered over a comparatively wide area in front of one of the houses. They were more than a mile away, but the ancient's eyes were keen, once they were soundly rubbed with his bony knuckles. He was relieved to find that the men running to and fro, like schoolboys at play, were not wearing uniforms. Ha! Now he knew what it was all about. A celebration of some kind. Somebody's birthday or—well, he would soon put a stop to all jollification! He would give them something else to think about besides banging away at nothing with their guns, just to make a noise in honor of Jonifer or that pretty wench of his. He hurried forward, trotting, walking, stumbling, and all the time trying to attract attention by uttering feeble cries that were meant to be shouts.

As he drew nearer, as yet unobserved by the shifting cele-

brators, he was astonished to observe two men on the roof of the house, apparently hacking away at it with axes. The spectators were cheering, but Tammas was wheezing hoarsely as he stumbled along:

"The poor fools! Poor fools!"

He was a scant two hundred yards away when some one saw his bent, shriveled old figure lurching along the road. Instantly there was a shout and men began to point at him. He was waving his arms weakly, from time to time half turning to shake an unsteady fist toward the mouth of the pass. The robbers were bewildered. Who was this strange old man? Where had he sprung from? He looked like a queer little gnome—and why was he shaking his fist at the mountains behind him? Then some one bawled:

"It is old Tammas! Tammas from the Inn!"

A shout of laughter followed, instantly checked by the crack of a rifle. Curses went up as one of the men crumpled up and sank to the ground in a huddle. Tammas stopped, his mouth agape. He stood there, blinking, while half a hundred guns returned the fire. Then, for the first time, he saw a number of inert figures lying in the snow near the house; he caught sight then of a group of women far up the road, and they had their hands uplifted toward the sky. He began to grasp the truth. This was no joyful celebration. Killing was going on! And those men on the top of the house,—they were pouring something on the cleared portions of the roof! He ran forward again, brandishing his arms and squealing:

"The army! The army! Soldiers! Hundreds and thousands of soldiers! The army!"

And finally they heard and understood. A number of them darted down to meet him.

"What is this you are saying?" cried Jan Melby, grabbing the old cellarer by the arm.

Tammas's knees gave way. He would have fallen but for the support of two or three arms.

"The soldiers are coming!" he gasped.

"You—you lie!" roared Melby. "This is a trick to draw us off just as we are about to roast them out."

He whisked out a knife and would have thrust it into Tammas's body but for the restraining hand of one of his companions.

"Let him speak!" cried this individual. "Out with it, old man! What is it you say about soldiers?"

Others came running up.

"I speak the truth," whispered Tammas. "They are not far behind me. You have no time to lose. They are in the pass, hundreds of horses and—and would you check them you must beat them to yon gateway."

Instant consternation seized upon the robbers. For the moment they seemed petrified, stunned. Melby, his staring eyes turned to the black slit in the mountain, cried out:

"Are you sure? Is this some cursed dream or crazy spell of—"

"It is God's truth," croaked Tammas. "They came in the night and seized the Inn. The Digmans are taken prisoner and all the men about the place. I alone was able to get away unseen and sneak through the door in the stable with a horse. I remember him well,—aye, both of them,—when they came to hunt deer a few days ago. They were from the Tower, those two,—curse them! They said they would come back, and they did."

"But—but the soldiers?" cried one of the men, jerking his arm violently. "Where are they?"

"I have never seen so many soldiers. They came in the night,—an army of them. There is a general and— But ask me no more! They are not far behind. I could hear them coming. I heard them smashing the walls of the

stable before I was fairly clear of the cavern. Make haste! What goes on here? Why are you shooting at—"

Here some one shouted:

"Jonifer! Jonifer!"

Scores of men ran toward the house, their hands on high, calling for Jonifer to come forth and lead them!

"The soldiers! The soldiers! Jonifer, come out! Drive them back! Come out! You are our chieftain. The soldiers!"

These and many other panic-stricken exhortations were uttered, and Jonifer Davos, hearing them, struggled up from the chair into which he had sunk but a few moments before, pushed the sobbing, pleading Gerane and Broadaxe away from him, and, with his hand clutching his blood-smeared breast, staggered to the door. His powerful legs were wobbling under him like those of a drunken man; he could scarcely lift his feet from the floor. Mastil and Peter rushed to his side, throwing their arms about him to hold him up.

"Open the door," gasped Jonifer, blood coursing down over his chin. He coughed and a spray of red spattered the door.

"For God's sake, uncle!" cried Peter. "No, no! It is a trick! Come back and let me—"

"Lift the bars, I say!"

A loud, frenzied shout came from Starcourt, who had sprung from Jonifer's side but a moment before. He was peeping through one of the window slits.

"It is no trick!" he fairly screamed. "Thank God! Soldiers! Yes, God bless them—dragoons! Look! Look! Two of them! Halting at the mouth of the— There is another,—and another! Now they are pouring out in—" His face was transfigured. He was beating his breast with insane joy.

Outside the mob was yelling for Jonifer to come and lead

them in battle. Already Jan Melby was shouting orders and men were gathering about him, brandishing gun and pistol. But, for all their fierce, undoubted courage and willingness to resist the foe, they knew that they were lost. They too had seen the pair of horsemen appear as if by magic in the mouth of the great portal, a mile and a half away. Even at that distance they could see the green coats and the little specks of red that were caps. They saw them stop and stand for a few moments like statues,—and then up came others.

Jonifer's door flew open. The chieftain, bracing himself against the thick jamb, stood alone, facing the men who had craved his blood and were now craving his help,—and in that crowd was one who had fired the shot that had found its way through the narrow crack in the window block to the broad breast of Jonifer the Hawk.

"You come too late!" he shouted, with a mighty effort. "This is what you have done to me, your best of friends. But I give you my dying breath. Drive them back. Broadaxe leads! Obey him! Fight for your lives, damn you all!" He coughed violently. "Jonifer the Hawk is going to the worms!"

His knees sagged, he slid slowly down the edge of the door and lurched across the opening. In a second Gerane threw herself down beside him, looking wildly into his dimming eyes. Then her hand drew the pistol from her bosom. He saw the act, realized her intention. With his last breath, he gasped:

"Do—not—do—that, Gerane! I—command you—to live! Good-by, child!" His eyes rolled toward the picture. "Good-by, Louise. This is—the—last time I shall ever see —you. For you—you are in heaven."

Gerane's lips were on his forehead. She did not know when Broadaxe and Strade and Mastil leaped past her, clearing the body of the dead leader; she was not conscious of

Starcourt's wresting the pistol from her hand. She hardly realized what was happening when strong arms suddenly seized her and she was swung high to the brawny shoulder of her cousin Peter. Then, like a flash, she saw and knew everything. She saw Starcourt sprawling on the floor,—she saw his blazing, horrified eyes and the blood that was beginning to trickle down into them as he tried to scramble to his feet.

"This is the last of *you!*" she heard Peter snarl as he paused on his way to the rear door,—paused for a second to blaze away with his pistol at Starcourt. She remembered uttering a cry,—strangely it was a cry of joy!—when Matilde threw herself upon Peter, clutching at his arm. The shot went wild.

A vicious oath broke from Peter's lips as he tried to fling the tall woman off. He kicked himself free, sending Matilde groaning to the floor. She herself fell and from her knees saw Peter and Starcourt fire at close range. A second later her cousin doubled up and plunged to the floor. Gavan Starcourt, still erect, with her own smoking pistol in his hand, stood over him, watching! But Peter did not move. There was a bullet in his brain.

Then she crawled back to her father, laid her hand upon his wet breast—and swooned. As she felt herself going she was curiously happy, for she thought she was dying.

Starcourt, whose head had been cut by a glancing blow from Peter's rifle barrel, looked dazedly at her for a moment before leaping to her side. Matilde reached her at the same time.

"She has fainted, and no wonder," cried she, her voice shaking. Then she sat up straight and put her hands to her bosom, her eyes fixed on Starcourt's. "We shall be free! I knew they would come. Something told me they would come! After all these years,—all these years! Oh, God,

how wonderful! Jonifer dead! No one left but you and Gerane and me! But now I must lave her and brush her hair and dress her for— What are you doing?"

He had leaped to his feet and was closing the door. Before answering, he dropped the bolts into place. Then he passed his hand over his forehead as if to clear away a fog that was bothering his eyes.

"Lord! We must lock them out. They must not get in here! We—"

"Lock them out?" she almost screamed. "Open that door! I have prayed for twenty years for them to come and you close the door in their faces and—"

"Hush! my dear Matilde! I am keeping out the others— not the soldiers. Don't you realize that some of them will rush in here— Ah! Just as I thought! I closed it in time. Some of them are trying to get in already! Lucky thing I thought of— But wait! It may be Broadaxe or Strade or Mastil. Hello! Is that you, Julius? Who is it?"

Matilde spoke, calmly now. "It is neither of them, Colonel Starcourt. You will find their dead bodies where the fighting has been thickest. They are like Jonifer Davos. Their forefathers fought with the Duke of Droon. Come! Carry her to her room. Then leave us. I will care for her. She needs me now more than she needs you. She must open her eyes on a friend. They are scarcer and rarer than lovers, my friend."

He took up the limp Gerane in his arms and carried her into the room beyond the curtains. As he laid her on the couch he bent and kissed her forehead.

"Now you are all mine, Gerane,—all my own, darling. There is no one else, poor, poor little girl."

His impulse was to seize weapons and rush out to join in the conflict, but common sense stayed him. He could do nothing; he would be an easy target for a score of deadly

marksmen; and his place was with Gerane, the daughter of the man on whose head the Crown had put a price. This daughter of Jonifer, the chieftain, perhaps had greater need of him now than ever before; it might be for him alone to stand between her and the law that was stretching out a relentless hand to strangle, without mercy, every man and woman it could grasp.

Running to one of the windows, he peered in the direction of the gap. His heart sank. There were less than fifty dragoons in view, and they were still standing motionless and apparently undecided where he had seen them, a short distance from the entrance. They were outnumbered! He could see the robbers running toward them, spreading out in wide, straggling formation. To him it looked as though the soldiers were at a loss to know whether these men were friends or foes, for as yet no shot had been fired.

"Oh, Lord!" he gulped. "They will pick those boys off as if they were rabbits. What is the matter with them? What the devil is the matter with them?" In his excitement he yelled, forgetful of distance and his own isolation: "At them! Come on! For God's sake, don't stand there and—"

Then the robbers began to shoot. He saw them stop, take aim and fire, and then, leaping in zigzag fashion, run forward again only to halt and shoot once more. Sick at heart and groaning, he turned away.

Suddenly he was conscious of a darting, cruel pain in his head. He put his hand up to feel and took it away instantly, wet and sticky and warm. For a moment he stared at it in the faint light from the window crack. And at once he was the soldier again. His brain cleared, his nerves and muscles were alive and responsive.

"God, that crack over the head!" He found the growing lump and the gash and uttered a short little laugh of disgust. "Nothing much!" Hurrying over to one of the pails of water

near the door to the kitchen passageway, he washed his face and hands; then, with nervous, impatient fingers, he wound a towel about his head, knotting it tightly at the back.

The room was heavy with acrid smoke, grayly dark; the atmosphere, charged with the smell and dust of gunpowder, was suffocating. He stood for a moment, looking about him with narrowed, pinched eyes. There were three dead men in the room,—two over yonder by the door. He must get them out of the way and cover them up before Gerane appeared. She must not see them.

But what of her? Was she still— He strode to the curtained door and listened. The sound of women's voices, hushed and low, came to him, spurring him to swift action. Dragging the bodies of Jonifer and Peter to the far end of the room, he covered them with curtains ruthlessly jerked down from the windows.

He was thus employed when suddenly it dawned upon him that the firing not only was nearer but had also increased in volume. Springing to a window, he glued his eyes to the crack, expecting to see— His heart leaped! He began to yell like an enthusiastic school boy, madly, exultingly. The whole lower end of the meadow swarmed with dragoons, while from the mouth of the crevasse a constant stream of horsemen poured. Scores of them, hundreds of them! They were everywhere! In the fields, along the road,—riding like the devil!

"Huzzah! Huzzah!" he croaked hoarsely. "Come on, boys! Come on!"

He could see dozens of the robbers, cut off from the sheltering forest, running before the green and red avalanche, whirling as they ran to shoot aimlessly at the troopers. The carbines of the dragoons were spitting fire with even more reckless disregard for results, and sabers gleamed in countless brandishing hands. He saw men in the road dismount and.

abandoning their horses, disappear among the trees on the heels of those who had succeeded in reaching the wood; he saw empty saddles down in the plain, mute testimony to the deadly aim of the robbers; he saw the troopers close in about the huddle of men not far below Jonifer's house, like a pack of hounds pouncing upon a cornered fox.

No longer in doubt as to the outcome, and satisfied that no harm could now befall him or Gerane, he jerked down the window bars and pulled out the protecting block of wood. As it tumbled to the floor, he could not help noticing that the side exposed to the fire of the besiegers was riddled with bullet holes. For a moment he stood, drinking in the crisp, fresh air, his gaze roving over the miniature battlefield. Here and there, a lone figure, running awkwardly through the snow, could be seen,—and always there were horsemen riding toward him!

So this was the end of the robbers of Droon Forest!

And still the soldiers came up from the Pass,—black-coated troopers these from the regular army. The green and red dragoons,—his own men!—were sweeping on toward the house. They were now less than a quarter of a mile away.

A hand fell upon his arm. He whirled and faced Gerane. Her eyes, dark and with a hunted look in them, were gazing past him out upon the white meadow; her face was as white as a ghost's.

"Oh, my darling!" he cried, throwing his arm about her. "Look at me! Look at me, Gerane,—not out there! Nothing can happen to you now. I will shield you, protect you now, dear,—all the rest of your life. You are not alone! You—"

"The army!" she whispered tremulously. "The soldiers! And where,—oh, where, are all my people?" She stiffened suddenly and, lifting her chin, looked into his eyes. "Which one is my father? Tell me! I must look at his face once

more before they— Oh, do not fear for me, Gavan. I am not a coward. I have been brought up to expect—this. Which is he? I do not want to look at the others. Only my father."

She withdrew herself from his arms. As he led her away from the window, Matilde, coming up from behind, cried out:

"Watch her! She has a dagger!"

Startled, he caught the girl's arm as it was quickly raised. His horrified eyes fell upon the glittering dagger in her hand. Then they went slowly to her face. After a moment, her chin sank, her fingers released their grasp on the knife and it went clattering to the floor; her body sagged against him as if all the strength had gone out of it. He caught her in his arms.

"My God, Gerane! You—you wouldn't have—done that?"

She lifted her eyes. "Why not?" she asked, so calmly that he could not believe his senses. "Better that than the other."

"The other?"

"The scaffold or the block. Aunt Katrane took the only way to—"

"Oh, you poor child! That? Never! You will be as free as a bird in an hour. Believe me, Gerane. Trust me! I will see to it that you—"

"The tables are turned, Colonel Starcourt," she interrupted. "I am your prisoner now."

"My prisoner? Nothing of the sort! You are my promised wife. You—"

"You may forget but I do not, Gavan, that I am the daughter of Jonifer Davos. I am one of the wretches the Crown has sworn to destroy. Just as those men out there are being destroyed. You can do nothing for me. I am one of the robbers of Droon Forest. You would not let me end it all as

I wished, so I am helpless. Now release me, please. I promise not to— Let me see my father's face—only for a moment. I shall never ask to look upon him again. I shall not try to—to escape again."

"Oh, I—I love you so, Gerane!"

"I am sure of it, Gavan," she said simply, and turned to look at the silent, ugly heaps. "Which one, Gavan?"

He led her to Jonifer and turned back the covering. She stood for a moment, as rigid as stone, peering down. Then she said, huskily, but without a break in her voice: "That is all, Gavan. Cover him again."

"I shall never forget that he died defending me," said he, and suddenly his hand was lifted in salute, his heels clicking together.

"They are coming!" cried Matilde from the window. "They are surrounding the house—and they are wary. An officer is—"

"Come!" exclaimed Starcourt, his arm about Gerane as he drew her quickly toward the door. "You are safe, Gerane! These are *my* friends. Do not be afraid!"

"Afraid?" she cried out, scornfully. "Let them in!"

Starcourt lifted the bar, threw the door wide open, and stood facing the troopers, one hand raised as if in surrender.

"Captain Allode!" he shouted, recognizing the officer. "Thank God, you have come! It is I—Starcourt! Don't you know me? Gavan Starcourt!"

The officer pulled up his horse with a jerk, his eyes wide and incredulous. Other troopers stared as if suddenly confronted by a specter.

"Starcourt? Alive? Good God! Alive—and here?"

"Alive? Of course I am," cried the other, now unsteadily. "But do not waste time talking to me, Allode. There is no one here but these two women and me. Don't waste time here."

But Allode, swinging to the ground, was rushing up to the doorway, his hands extended.

"This is unbelievable! Why, man," he almost sobbed, "we have looked upon you as dead." He was wringing Starcourt's hand. "Services for the dead have been held for you in all the churches. Your mother— Oh, this will be glorious news for her! But how come you to be here with this gang of—"

"I was taken prisoner," broke in Starcourt hurriedly. "Captured. Brought here by the—by the brigands. You shall have the story later, Dirke. Ride on, man! There are more of them—"

But the men were shouting his name to those behind. It went in ringing tones from mouth to mouth, far down into the fields, up into the wood where men still were shooting, and clear to the gate in the mountain:

"Starcourt! Starcourt! Starcourt!"

"What, in God's name, is the meaning of all these dead men lying here in front—" began Allode, gazing about him in bewilderment. "Holy saints above! Have you been barricaded in this house, shooting them down single-handed and— Who is this girl?"

For the first time he took account of the slender, drooping figure supported by Starcourt's arm. And beyond the couple in the door was a tall woman who was crying.

Up to this very instant, Gerane's clouded, miserable eyes had been staring past Allode and his men at the unimaginable scene that stretched before her in the lower meadow. Everywhere were soldiers,—hundreds and hundreds of them!—sweeping over the valley like a tornado that was leveling everything in its path. Nothing but horsemen! Not a sign of a man on foot, not a single figure wearing the well-remembered fur coat and the bushy cap! Little black splotches on the snow,—that was all. She knew what they were. Her ears took in the crackle of unseen guns, the yells of trium-

phant invaders, an occasional shriek,—and she knew what it all meant. Bright, gaudy uniforms,—as like as peas. . . . Her head sank. The mighty, boastful robbers of Droon Forest,—where were they now? She was alone,—alone with the soldiers of the Crown,—Starcourt's men. His people! Her enemies! And suddenly she clung to him tightly, like a frightened child.

Starcourt's mind worked rapidly. "She is also a prisoner," was his reply to Captain Allode.

At this juncture up rode the commanding officer, a colonel from the post at Fort Ganlook. He leaped to the ground and rushed to Starcourt, his eyes blazing with joy and astonishment.

"Can I believe my eyes?" he cried. "It's true, then! You are alive and—"

"Let me go with Matilde, Gavan," said Gerane, lifting her head and straightening her figure. He glanced at her quickly, struck by her steadiness, the clearness of her voice. He saw her bosom swell. "You and your friends will find us in there when you want us."

He released her instantly and she drew back into the interior of the house with Matilde.

"Who is she?" inquired the colonel, staring after her, his hand still gripping Starcourt's. His eyes had narrowed suspiciously.

Gavan did not answer at once. He felt giddy. His hand went to the rude bandage about his head.

"You are wounded," cried Allode.

"Slightly. It's nothing."

"Whose house is this, Colonel Starcourt?" demanded the Colonel, peering inside.

Starcourt sighed. "It was the home of Jonifer Davos. He is lying in there on the floor, dead. Killed by his own men.

See for yourself,—these are dead robbers out here. You came just in time. We were surrounded by—"

"His own men? I do not understand. And he is dead—in there?"

"It is too long a story to tell now, Colonel," said the other. Grasping the officer's arm, he led him down to the roadside, away from the door. "So far as I know, there are none but women in these houses,—women and children and a few old people." He pointed. "There is not a soul in sight. Go slow, Colonel. These women can shoot,—and that is just what they may do. Tell your men to be careful. And you too, Captain Allode. You have the situation in hand,—go slow."

The colonel gave a few sharp commands and then deliberately turned his steps toward the house.

"Come with me, Colonel Starcourt," he said brusquely. "I would see this man, Davos. I have sent for one of our surgeons. He will be here soon to look after your wound."

"One moment, please. Let me look in first and see if—if she is with him," said Gavan, laying a restraining hand on the other's arm.

"She? What do you mean?"

"I want to shield her from anything—anything unpleasant, Colonel. She is the daughter of Jonifer Davos."

"Good Lord, man!"

"And she is to become my wife, sir,—on the fifteenth of this month. You may well look amazed. It is hard to grasp. The daughter of the scourge of the Inn of the Hawk and Raven to become Lady Starcourt— *Wait* here, Colonel. I will not be a second."

Gerane was not visible. He beckoned and the dumbfounded officer entered the room, followed by three or four subordinates. Leading them to Jonifer's body, he threw aside the covering.

"Here is Jonifer Davos,—Jonifer the Hawk,—the man you and I and scores of others before us have hunted for years."

He turned away and left them gazing down upon the still face of Jonifer. Going to the curtained door he called quietly:

"Are you there, Gerane? Are you all right, dearest?"

She answered promptly, without a quaver in her voice:

"I will be ready to go with you when you give the word. You have only to call."

"Don't be afraid. Nothing can happen to you now."

He rejoined the group at the opposite end of the room. As he passed the door, he saw a seemingly endless procession of dragoons and troopers riding by at a jog-trot.

"Now is as good a time as any other, Colonel Shiraz, to give you a brief account of what has happened here in the past twenty-four hours," he said.

"You say that is Jonifer Davos. I shall have to take your word for it, Colonel Starcourt."

"It is Jonifer Davos. I knew him well. Before we go any farther it may interest you to learn of something that no one at Castle or Tower or Citadel even suspects. He was a direct, lineal descendant of the Duke of Droon. He was the great-grandson of the first duke."

With this introduction, he rapidly sketched the story, beginning with his own capture, and bringing it up to the moment with curt, military precision and brevity.

"I will give you a fuller account later, Shiraz,—but that is for another day. Here lies his nephew, Peter, and yonder is Jahn Crispo. The woman with Jonifer's daughter came here a captive, over twenty years ago, in company with Louise Hazenstahl, whose disappearance you will recall. Jonifer married the Baroness Hazenstahl, and you have just seen their daughter. I may add that she is neither a thief nor

a robber, Colonel. If she were anything but what she is, the loveliest and rarest girl I have ever known, I would not say to you here and now that I shall consider it an honor and the greatest good fortune that could befall any man when I am able to call her my wife."

Shiraz looked uncomfortable.

"Now, this is a devil of a mess, Starcourt. I don't know just what to say to you. You see,—er,—there is really no way out of it. She is—er—a prisoner, sir. It is not for me to discriminate or—well, you must see how it is, my friend. I am sorry, but—"

"I understand perfectly, Shiraz. Your position is the same as mine was six months ago. All I ask, sir, is that she be treated with courtesy and—and gentleness."

"She will have to go to the Tower," said the unhappy colonel.

"Leave that to me," broke in Starcourt. "I shall appeal to the Regent the instant we reach the city. Baron Dangloss will see to it that she has every care and consideration. Why, dammit, man, he would no more think of throwing her into a cell than he'd think of putting me into one. Hullo! Here is the sawbones and tinker."

Later on, when his wound was dressed and bandaged, he remarked to the colonel:

"With your permission, I should like to go out now and see if I can locate Selim, her horse. She will ride him to the city, if it does not conflict with your plans, Shiraz. And, as I was saying, there certainly can be no objection to her taking along with her that casket containing the duke's decorations and her own mother's jewels. They belong to her, you know. They were not stolen from anybody."

"I see no reason why she shouldn't take them with her. Of course, their final disposition will rest with the authorities. You spoke of burying Jonifer Davos here in the mountains.

In fact, sir, you gave me the impression that it was a command on your part."

"It is what she would like, Shiraz."

"But it is impossible," said the other, curtly. "I am in command of this force. My instructions are the same as yours were. We were both ordered to bring Jonifer Davos to the Tower, dead or alive. I am sorry I cannot grant your request."

"I beg your pardon, Shiraz. I quite forgot that I am no longer an officer in the Dragoons. I am supposed to be dead."

Shiraz's smile was friendly. "But not buried, thank God!"

When, an hour later, Gerane emerged from her room in response to Starcourt's call, her eyes went at once to the far end of the room. She seemed not to notice the small group of officers gathered near the fireplace in which logs were now blazing. A long sigh escaped her lips. The three bodies had been spirited away. She did not know it, but her father's was already strapped to the back of a horse out in one of the sheds, awaiting rough, undignified transportation to the Tower. Distant, occasional reports of rifles came faintly to her ears. A bitter, faintly sardonic smile twisted her lips as she looked from Starcourt to Colonel Shiraz. Far up in the hills the Crown's huntsmen were still bringing down their game.

Starcourt stared at her. She was dressed as he had seen her first on that memorable morning in the Inn of the Hawk and Raven,—when he believed her to be and referred to her as a "lad"; nut-brown hunting breeches, embroidered half-boots, peaked black hat and long brown mantle. Only the mask and weapons were lacking, but now she wore a red feather in her hat!

For a moment there was silence in the room. The room was bright, all the windows and doors having been opened on Shiraz's orders. Every eye was riveted upon the face of

this lovely girl who stood before them, pale, erect and strangely self-composed. No one looked at the other woman whose tall figure was clothed in a heavy fur coat and who carried a carefully wrapped bundle in each hand.

Starcourt stepped to Gerane's side:

"The future Countess Maris-Starcourt, gentlemen," he said, "Miss Gerane Davos. This, Gerane, is Colonel Shiraz, in command of our troops."

She addressed herself at once to Shiraz. Indicating the portrait of her mother, she said:

"I have only one favor to ask. Please spare that picture. It is the portrait of my mother. She never wronged the Crown. I should like to keep it, sir. I ask for nothing else."

Without so much as a glance at the saddle-bags containing the costly relics of the first Duke and also her mother's jewels, she went on, turning to her lover:

"I am ready now, Colonel Starcourt, to do whatever you command."

"Colonel Shiraz is in charge, Gerane. He is providing us with a special escort—"

"I was his prisoner before you came," she interrupted calmly. "That is the only reason why I am alive now, Colonel Shiraz. If it were not for the fact that I gave him my promise, you would have found me dead when you entered this house."

Shiraz, to his own amazement, bowed low and, with his hand on his heart, assured her that it afforded him the greatest pleasure to step aside and leave her in charge of Colonel Starcourt, whose prior claim he was happy to acknowledge.

"And this portrait of your mother, Miss Davos—I myself shall be personally responsible for its safe delivery to you."

He thought twice and did not ask where it was to be delivered.

Tears came to her eyes when she saw black Selim, saddled

and waiting for her at the roadside, but she said nothing. He whinnied when she put her cheek to his muzzle. Starcourt gave her a leg and she swung easily into the saddle. Then her somber eyes ranged the valley and the lofty peaks. So it was that she bade them a mute farewell. There was not a dead body in sight. Only soldiers, soldiers, soldiers!

She was at Starcourt's side as they rode off toward the gap. Behind them came Matilde, whose lean, tired face had become strangely young and whose eyes shone with something that had not been in them for more than a score of years. Ahead were prancing dragoons and in their wake came others, half a hundred picked men in charge of Captain Allode. Far to the rear was a riderless horse laden with bags and bundles, the honest fortune of Jonifer's daughter. There was but one stolen article in that little cavalcade and it was worn by an ununiformed officer of the Duke's Dragoons—a sable coat.

Leaning close to her, he pointed. "Over there, Gerane, is where Julius Broadaxe fell. I saw him. Jan Melby, too. Matthew and Joseph, your cousins—they are dead. I saw scores of them— Oh, I am sorry, dear."

She lowered her head. Her shoulders sagged.

"Then, they are all gone," she murmured. "I am—alone! There is not one of my people left, Gavan—not one."

He reached out and took her hand in his.

"You are one of *my* people now, Gerane," he said solemnly.

CHAPTER XVIII

GERANE'S PUNISHMENT

THE Cabinet of Ministers was called together in extraordinary session by the Regent on the fourth day of Gerane's confinement as a prisoner in the Tower.

Notwithstanding the appeals and entreaties of Colonel Starcourt she was lodged in the grim old prison immediately upon her arrival in the city. He had realized from the beginning that no other course was open to the authorities; nevertheless, he had set about with dogged resolution to obtain as speedily as possible an order of clemency from the Crown itself.

As for Jonifer's daughter, she seemed to be absolutely indifferent insofar as her own plight was concerned. She shook her head and smiled sadly when he endeavored to convince her that he would have her out of the Tower in a very short time. This promise, if one could call it such, had been repeated innumerable times since she came to the Tower three days ago.

"Poor Gavan," was all she said.

"I have an audience with the Regent, Count Halfont, this morning, dearest, and I shall have you out of this place before the day is over. See! Even as it is, I have prevailed upon Baron Dangloss to lodge you in this airy, commodious room high up in the Tower. He promises me that you shall have every comfort."

"He is very kind," she said. "I was afraid of him at first. As you say, he has put me in this room far away from the

cells in which all those other women from the valley are confined, but look! There are bars in the windows, the walls and the floor are of stone, and a man sits outside my door, night and day. I have been here two days and two nights, and always there is a man sitting outside that door with the barred opening just head high, so that he can peep in at me whenever he pleases."

He flinched. "But I am permitted to enter, my dear," he said quickly. "They open the door to me. That is an unheard of concession. Baron Dangloss assures me it has never been done before to his certain knowledge. Does that look as though they regard you in the light of an ordinary prisoner? No, indeed! Do they not allow you to have Matilde with you whenever you desire? They treat you as if you were royalty! Ha! Ha! Was not my dear, splendid mother here yesterday to visit the girl who is to be her daughter? Did they close and lock the door on her? Or on me? What if there is a guard outside? It is only a matter of regulations. Have courage!"

"Your mother is coming again to-day, to bring food to me from her own kitchen, Gavan," she cried, her eyes brightening. "She is very wonderful. She is the most wonderful woman in all the world. Oh, I hope she will let me love her."

"Let you? Of course, she will. And she said to me last night—listen to what she said and she meant it,—almost your very words—'She is lovely, Gavan. She is the most adorable girl in the world, poor child.'"

"That is because she is so happy, Gavan," said she, wisely. "She loves the world and everything in it since you have come home safely to her." She made a brave effort to command a bantering smile. "And is it any wonder? Never have I looked upon so gorgeous a uniform as the one her son is wearing at this moment. You quite dazzle me, Gavan."

He laughed. "You should see the way people follow me in the streets, their eyes popping. I daresay it excites them immensely to behold a dead man walking about as if he were really alive. And, by the way, you are looking perfectly adorable in the frock you have on to-day, sweetheart. Never have I seen you looking so—"

"You have seen this frock a dozen times, sir," she announced.

"But never have I seen you look so well in it," cried he gallantly, and kissed her. "I don't know how I can endure waiting till the fifteenth of March. Two whole weeks and three days over!"

"The—fifteenth—of March," she murmured, turning suddenly away and walking over to the little barred window, her eyes lifted over her shoulder at him. "I do not look down at the street any more, Gavan. There are always people out there staring up at this window. They know that the terrible Jonifer's daughter is in this room."

He did not tell her that this was the very cell in which her royal forefather spent his last days, or that one morning a hundred years ago he had walked out of it to lay his head on the block.

A small bedstead, with clean linen and blankets, stood in the corner of the cell. The first night she had slept on a coarse straw mattress placed, as usual, on the floor. There was a little bench and a table, an earthenware pitcher containing water and a mug standing on the latter. A charcoal brazier, supplied by Dangloss himself, provided heat. One of the tiny windows,—she had to stand on tip-toe to look down from them,—faced the street that once had been a moat but was now lined with shops and cheap eating houses; the other looked out upon the wide roof of the main building, with its bastions and watch-towers from which ancient bowmen were wont to shoot their darts in bygone days. To reach

this high cell she had been obliged to ascend dark, tortuous stairways that seemed unending, following on the heels of a warden bearing a lantern, pursued, as it were, by two complaining jailers with jangling keys. And she had said to Starcourt the following morning:

"This is not the way my father planned to have me come to Edelweiss, nor am I to go to the court he had in mind. He had his heart set on my finding a place in high society! Poor father! Well, I am high enough, heaven knows, but you would hardly describe this as society, now would you?"

Far below her, in cell and dungeon and hospital ward, were women and men and children brought in by the troops during the night just past. There were but few young men among them, and these were wounded. Up in the lofty valley some four score men were buried in a great trench. Only one was brought to Edelweiss; the leader who was to be delivered, dead or alive, to the commander of the Tower. For many days to come, soldiers would continue to scour the hills and forests and, when the relentless quest was over, the last of the hunted, starving wretches would be in their hands —dead or alive.

She knew, as she stood at the little window and gazed sadly upon the silent, everlasting peaks far to the north, that the little kingdom of Jonifer was no more. The sun, however, would continue to smile upon the fields and pastures; and other men and women would come to live where thieves had dwelt. And she had been a princess in that smug little land, with doughty subjects all about her—murderers, thieves, cutthroats, rascals, to be sure, but friends! Now she was a weak, helpless, forlorn little nobody, with but two people in all the world who cared whether she lived or died. Her proud heart was sore.

An unconquerable spirit of optimism,—perhaps it would be better to call it fatalism,—born in her and nourished by

an unfailing courage, alone kept her from giving way to despair. She had done no wrong. Fate had ushered her into the world and fate would take care of her. It had brought Gavan Starcourt to her in one of its most incredible whims; it had caused love to grow where scorn and hatred should have thrived; it had sent the soldiers to his rescue; it had kept her father from falling into the hands of the law; it had, in a sense, spared Broadaxe and Crispo and others; it had put her in this grim, forbidding cell, but it had not gone away and left her. She was unhappy, for she had lost something that no earthly power could restore to her; she knew an inward grief that could never be assuaged, but still her head was high, her heart unbeaten. The day would come, she felt down in her staunch and trusting soul, when God—for she believed in God—would lead her out of darkness into the light,—that He had never, until this bitter hour denied her.

Matilde, a free woman at last, had found refuge in the home of the Countess Maris-Starcourt. There had been no indecision on the part of the authorities after Colonel Starcourt's revelations. She had been released from custody at once but had begged for and received permission from the Commander of the Tower to spend much of her time with Gerane. It was she who brought Jonifer's daughter the news of the arrival at the Tower of the sullen, despairing men and women who had been her life-long friends and companions. She told of the gigantic Digmans who whimpered like children down in the dungeon keep; of Professor Gratz and lame old Heber Dykas and Ranya Brutz, who was stark, raving mad and crying for her three sons; of Elda Dykas, who had killed a soldier and was sure to hang for it; of the finding of the treasure cave high up in the mountains, and of the turmoil of excitement that gripped all Edelweiss. And of black Selim, safe and sound, in the Countess's stables.

A messenger from the Prime Minister was on his way to Baron Hazenstahl, Gerane's uncle in Vienna, with a full and authentic statement, dictated and signed by Matilde von Laggen, setting forth all of the facts connected with the kidnaping and subsequent life of the beautiful Louise Hazenstahl, and informing him of the existence of a daughter legitimately born to his sister in the stronghold of Jonifer Davos, lineal descendant of the Duke of Droon.

Starcourt's first appeal to the Regent had excited the sympathy of that all-important personage. At first, Count Halfont, attributing the young man's fervor to a youthful and mistaken idea of gallantry, refused to intercede in Gerane's behalf,—or in his behalf, which after all is what it really came to,—strongly counseling him to forget the foolish promise he had made under the urge of propinquity and to allow the law to take its course in her case as in all the others.

"It is out of the question, Colonel Starcourt," he had said. "You have no more right to ask clemency for that girl than you would have to claim it for the other women, who, I understand, are being brought to the city to-night. The fact that you have asked her to become your wife is no reason at all for the Crown to become—er—sentimental. I do not question your sincerity. You are, if I may be forgiven for mentioning it, a victim of circumstances. I daresay it was natural and unavoidable that you should fall in love with this girl. Baron Dangloss informs me that she is—er—very lovely and quite superior in the matter of cultivation. Nevertheless, she is the daughter of Jonifer Davos and is no more deserving of clemency than any other prisoner taken by our troops. I am sorry I cannot—"

"But, your excellency, she is *not* a thief," broke in Starcourt. "She is the daughter of an Austrian noblewoman. She has never been in sympathy with the unscrupulous acts of the robbers. I wish I could make you understand, sir. You speak

of me as a victim of circumstances. If ever there was a creature of circumstances it is she. I am not a silly boy, your excellency. I have not lost my head, even though I have lost my heart."

"The surprising news that this robber chieftain was a descendant of the Duke of Droon makes his daughter's case all the more difficult so far as the Crown is concerned. Nor are we likely to be influenced in her favor by the amazing discovery that the Countess Jabassy was her aunt and Jonifer Davos's own sister. We do not forget the Countess Jabassy, Colonel Starcourt. We are not forgetful that she too was a descendant of the Duke of Droon and that we gave her a place among us."

"You do forget, sir, that Gerane is the daughter of an honorable woman. And I may be forgiven, your excellency, if I go so far as to say that Jonifer Davos, for all his crimes and all his deviltry, was a man of surpassing fairness and loyalty. He was a brave man, a true thoroughbred, and he idolized his wife and daughter. The blood of a Prince of Graustark flowed in his veins. He was a robber, sir, but I shall not be ashamed to call his daughter my wife. Nor if I looked the world over could I find a nobler woman."

They talked for an hour. Starcourt went away with his hopes high. The Regent finally had agreed to confer with the three ministers most directly concerned in the disposition of causes affecting the security of the Crown, to-wit: State, Justice and Police. The young man was to present himself the next day to hear the result of their most private conference. As he was leaving the Regent's chamber in the castle, the Count said to him:

"We are not tyrants or despots, Starcourt. We have never made war upon women. It is not our desire or purpose to inflict dire punishment upon women whose principal offense, as I see it, lies in their loyalty to husbands who happen to

have been rogues and plunderers. No mercy will be shown the men. They will be made to suffer the extreme penalty. You know what that means. But as for the women,—well, as I have said, we do not make war upon women."

As a result of the conference with the three ministers, the Regent summoned the entire cabinet to the castle. Starcourt was informed that the Minister of Justice strongly opposed clemency in the case of Jonifer's daughter, basing his objection solely on the law as laid down by the people of Graustark themselves.

"If your excellency, however, is disposed to grant a full pardon to the young woman, I shall be the last to object," he had qualified, bowing profoundly. It was a sly way of putting the burden upon the shoulders of the Regent.

Gavan and his mother, who had been notified that her presence was desired, appeared at the castle at three o'clock. They came straight from the Tower, whither the Countess had accompanied him, bearing a basket of fresh fruit and a quantity of flowers from her own conservatory. He was not slow to notice that she seemed moody and preoccupied during the ride to the castle. She was holding his hand, but she looked straight before her all the way up Castle Avenue, her gaze fixed on the formidable gates and the statuesque mounted guardsmen who stood outside them.

"You have no conception of the relief and joy your attitude toward Gerane causes me," he ventured, sensing difficulty. "I am glad you like her, mother dear."

Still she did not look at him. "She is the loveliest girl I have ever seen," she acknowledged, a trifle evasively, he thought.

"But you cannot get it out of your head that she is the daughter of a bandit," he remarked, after a long silence.

"Is it unnatural that I should be dubious, Gavan? You

are my only son. Your father came of a very proud and distinguished family. I will be frank with you. It may be that the best thing for—well, for you, my son—would be a decision on the part of the Crown to keep her where she is for—"

"Stop, mother dear! Don't say it. I knew you had some such thought in your mind. But it is not a just one. I see how it is with you, however. You were so carried away by joy that you could think of nothing save the happiness of the son who has come back to you from the grave, so to speak. Now you have had time to think. You are wondering,—and I am not surprised. You are wondering what people here and in England will say if fortune favors me and she becomes Lady Starcourt. What will be the outcome? Will she be accepted or rejected,—that is the thing that is uppermost in your thoughts. Am I not right?"

"In a way, yes. First of all, I am thinking of what it will mean to you after the glamour has worn off. Besides, I am selfishly considering myself, Gavan. I wonder if you realize what it will mean to me to have the daughter of the terrible Jonifer Davos as a daughter-in-law?"

"I think, mother dear, that I can answer for both of us. For you and for me, I mean. I know that I shall always love her and honor her, come what may, and I know that you will love her too."

"You must not forget that you are no longer in a secret little valley up in the mountains, Gavan. I confess it would be difficult for you or any other man not to fall in love with her. I can understand your being happy with her forever if fate so ordered that you were to spend the rest of your life in the forest with her. But this is the great, wide world, Gavan. You are living among people of your own kind, my son."

"I fell in love with her, mother, the day I saw her clad as a gypsy in Castle Avenue. I did not know it then, but now I am certain of it."

She smiled. "I did not know you were so impressionable. You fell in love with a pretty gypsy girl?"

"Ah, but she was not a gypsy girl," he cried, triumphantly. "That's the point. My instincts were not at fault. You know,—and God knows,—that I am not an impressionable ass. I've seen a great many pretty faces, you know. Is it necessary for me to remind you that I fell in love with a girl whose blood is as good as yours or mine, whose instincts are as fine, and who enjoys a mentality far superior to—"

"One could say the same and more for her aunt, Katrane Jabassy, Gavan," his mother reminded him. Then she laid her hand on his knee. "I believe she is all you claim for her. I have never known more consummate serenity and dignity in a girl so young. She is not gauche, she is self-contained, gentle, and yet, what is quite incomprehensible to me, there is something actually imperious about her. I have seen her but twice and I cannot help comparing her to those calm, unflinching noblewomen who went to the French guillotine with their heads high and disdain for the butchers in their eyes."

"Her great-great-grandfather went to the block without flinching," said he. "It's in the blood."

She sighed. "I wonder what the attitude of the respectable Hazenstahls will be toward her."

They waited in an ante-room for the call to present themselves, either singly or together, before the Regent and his cabinet. Half an hour elapsed before, to Starcourt's astonishment, Matilde von Laggen emerged from the historic "Room of Wrangles," a satiric name conferred upon the council chamber by a sorely harassed young ruler of an earlier generation. He was given no opportunity to question her, how-

ever. A stately functionary requested them to follow him at once.

A dozen members of the cabinet were ranged about the long table, the Regent sitting at the head of it. They all arose and bowed to the Countess, who took a chair courteously indicated by the Regent. Starcourt remained standing.

"Your ladyship," began Count Halfont, without preamble, "we have but one question to ask of you. Are you in complete accord with your son in respect to his proposed and desired matrimonial alliance with the daughter of Jonifer Davos, the robber chieftain of Droon Forest?"

It was a facer, coming like a sharp, unexpected blow. Gavan's mother did not hesitate, however. She cast the die without reservation, now that the time had come for her to stand for or against Gerane Davos.

"I am, your excellency, and gentlemen," she replied promptly. "He has had ample time in which to decide a very important question for himself and he has done so. He would have taken her as his wife if they had continued to live on in the hills. I can see no reason why his judgment should not be as good now as it was then."

Several of the ministers smiled at this rather cool, ingenuous conclusion.

"Ahem!" coughed the Regent. Turning to Starcourt, he said: "We have listened to the story of—er—Matilde von Laggen. She has given us a lengthy and most interesting recital of her life and experiences in the robber stronghold. It is not necessary to repeat it here. Suffice it to say, she has convinced us of many things. We do not for an instant doubt her sincerity or her integrity. She has made it clear to us that this daughter of Jonifer Davos and Louise Hazenstahl is not deserving of harsh treatment at our hands. In short, sir, she is, as I believe you yourself have said, a creature of circumstances; furthermore, we are now of the

opinion that she at no time could have been described as a—er—as an active or even potential member of the band of robbers that has just been broken up. Thievery was repugnant to her. We have heard from the von Laggen woman of Davos's ambitions concerning his only child, and of his devotion to her. We understand his motive in laying up a goodly store of this world's riches for her, however lawlessly they may have been acquired. She spurned them. We have decided, after hearing your plea in her behalf and the story of her mother's companion, to exercise the power vested in us and discharge her from custody. It is my pleasure, therefore, Colonel Starcourt, to inform you that Gerane Davos will be released from her place of confinement in the Tower one week from to-day."

Starcourt made no effort to conceal his relief and joy. His face lighted up, his heart shone in his eyes. Nevertheless, he drew himself erect as a soldier would, bowed deeply, and expressed his gratitude in very few words. If he was disappointed in the decision to hold her prisoner for another week, he did not reveal it by word or sign.

"You will,—and she will, I am sure,—appreciate our object in holding her for a week longer, notwithstanding our determination to absolve her of all complicity in the crimes of her father and his men. We desire to hold her until a full report has been obtained from those who are still employed in the search for stolen treasure and in certain investigations that may require voluntary assistance on her part. It is, however, our verdict that immediately upon her release she shall be required to leave Graustark and seek a place of residence elsewhere, never to return to this country unless a royal decree be issued permitting her to do so."

The Countess started, but Gavan Starcourt again bowed and said:

"I had anticipated this, your excellency. I fully appre-

ciate your reasons for wishing to banish her from this country."

"You realize just what this means, Colonel Starcourt?"

"I do, sir. It is virtually exile for me."

"Oh, my son!" cried out the Countess, involuntarily.

Starcourt was very pale, but his jaw was set. "I am, your excellency and gentlemen, when all is said and done, a British subject. I hold my commission in the Duke's Dragoons by virtue of heredity. I am a citizen of Graustark only because the law of this country grants the right of citizenship to any male child whose parents or grandparents belong to the nobility and possess lands in this state by inheritance. I am, as you know, the hereditary owner of certain property in this city and land in the southern part of the principality. Both of my grandfathers were counts and loyal subjects of the Crown. My mother is a noblewoman in her own right. Nevertheless, my father was a British subject and I am a citizen of that country. I was born and reared there. My position here, on the other hand, is not a matter of doubt. I am by right of heredity a member of the House of Nobles and therefore a citizen of Graustark with full power to exercise franchise on all questions that may come before the diet."

"That is quite clear to all of us, Count Maris-Starcourt," said the Regent urbanely.

"The Crown and the House of Nobles, however, have the right to revoke—"

"Permit me to interrupt you, Colonel Starcourt," interrupted the Regent. "The Crown and the House of Nobles have neither the intention nor the desire to deprive you of your heredity rights. No matter what course you may elect to pursue we shall still consider it an honor and a privilege to count you as one of us. We are not banishing you, my young friend. Nothing could be farther from our thoughts."

"For that, your excellency, I am more gratified than words will allow me to express," said Gavan, bowing deeply.

The Prime Minister leaned over and spoke to the Regent in an undertone. Then having received a nod granting permission, he addressed himself to the young man.

"Is it perfectly clear to you, Colonel Starcourt, that if you carry out your plan to marry Miss Davos you will be taking unto yourself a wife who cannot accompany you to this country in case you desire at any time to visit us?"

"It is hard, sir, but I am prepared to accept that condition. It will afford me the greatest pleasure to make a British subject of her." He spoke with a fine irony that was not to be ignored. No one, however, frowned.

Baron Dangloss took this occasion to observe drily:

"It occurs to me that such dire punishment should not be inflicted upon Miss Davos without at least giving her a chance to defend herself. She may prefer to remain in the Tower as a prisoner for the rest of her natural life."

This sally drew a laugh from every person present. The Regent, smiling broadly, remarked:

"It is not our purpose to condemn her unheard, Baron. She shall be given the opportunity to refuse our clemency if she so desires. I am obliged to say, however, that she may not avail herself of the conditions that are to be imposed upon the women, with four exceptions, who were made prisoners in the recent raid."

"I—I am afraid I do not understand, sir," said Gavan, perplexed.

"Except for the four women who shot and killed soldiers of the Crown in the course of conflict, the women and children are to be bound out as serfs on the farms of Graustark. They are not to be held in prison, Colonel Starcourt. They are to be given the opportunity to earn an honest living. Even so, they will not be the slaves they were up to the day we

seized them. Baron Dangloss informs us that Miss Davos herself is the only woman among them who ever put foot outside of the valley."

"That is true, your excellency. Nevertheless, sir, I believe they were happy and contented women."

"I daresay," said the Regent, curtly. "You have heard the conditions on which Jonifer Davos's daughter is to be given her freedom. This day week she will have to leave Graustark forever. No descendant of the Duke of Droon may live in this land, Colonel Starcourt. It is not, you will perceive, the daughter of Jonifer Davos we are banishing, but the great-great-granddaughter of Droon. We could, if we desired to be merciless, send Jonifer Davos's daughter to the gallows. That would be our only alternative in view of the fact that she may not be allowed to *live* among us. We do not believe that the daughter of Jonifer Davos is responsible for the crimes of her father. She is innocent of intent or connivance. As a descendant of the Duke of Droon, however, her presence in Graustark cannot be tolerated by the Crown. The reasons are obvious. As for your own intentions, Colonel Starcourt,—well, they rest entirely with you. We have no advice, no suggestions, to offer. It is for you to decide. Permit me, Countess, to bid you good afternoon and to thank you for coming here. I speak for the ministry as well as for the Crown itself."

There was a great deal of bowing and presently Gavan Starcourt and his mother found themselves in the hall leading to the private entrance to the castle. She laid her hand upon his arm.

"Gavan, my son, it is for you to decide. Are you willing to resign your post in the army, retire from Graustark and take up your life elsewhere, perhaps forever, for the sake of this girl?"

"Put it in a different way, mother," said he, quietly. "Am

I willing to give up these things in order to be happy? Perhaps forever? I can answer that without hesitation,—yes."

"She will be Lady Starcourt, Gavan," she murmured, wincing inwardly.

"Thank God for that," said he, gently pressing the hand that rested upon his arm.

Countess Maris-Starcourt sighed and then smiled a little sadly. They walked out of the castle in silence and entered her carriage.

"To the Tower, Franz," she directed the footman, to her son's surprise, and leaned back in the seat.

"God, you—you are great, mother," cried he in English.

"It is a wise mother who knows her own son," she paraphrased, the smile still on her lips.

Arriving at the Tower, they were informed by a warden that the prisoner, Gerane Davos, had been conducted to the castle nearly an hour before by secret service agents, Corpaz and Braun.

"Oh, the poor child," cried the Countess. "She will be terrified out of her boots by that group of solemn, imposing, unfeeling men in the cabinet chamber."

Starcourt laughed. "You don't know her, mother." His face sobered an instant later, however. "Perhaps you are right. It's all so new and strange to her. She will be overwhelmed by the grandeur and magnificence of the royal castle and— Bless her plucky little heart, I hate to think of her facing all those men alone. One little girl against a dozen stern-faced—"

The warder hastily interrupted. "She is returning even now, Colonel Starcourt." He was looking through his little window into the courtyard.

"She must have faced the cabinet before we did," said Gavan uneasily.

"And they called her back again after hearing what both of us had to say," said the Countess, guessing correctly.

"She does not look to me as if she had been very badly frightened," said the warder, with a chuckle. "I may say, sir, with your permission, that she is—er—ahem! what one might call a—er—a very pretty girl."

"You certainly have my permission to say it," said Starcourt, and both he and the warder bowed very low to one another.

It was but a short time before another warder came into the visitors' chamber and announced that the prisoner was now in her cell and that he was directed to conduct Colonel Starcourt to her immediately.

"Madame the Countess will be so gracious as to wait here for ten minutes," he said, with a ceremonious bow.

Corpaz was waiting in the corridor. His usually hard, inscrutable eyes were twinkling. He fell in alongside Starcourt and climbed the stairway with him.

"Baron Dangloss requests me to inform you, Colonel, that he is convinced you have made a far more important capture than all the King's horses and all the King's men could have accomplished in a life-time. I am using his very words."

"And you, Peter Corpaz?"

The Baron's right-hand man snapped his fingers rather airily. "It is no trick at all, sir, to capture robbers if you know how to go about it," he remarked. "But to capture—Heigh-ho! Baron Dangloss is right as usual."

"It is most gratifying, Corpaz, to see that you have such implicit confidence in him," said the other, linking arms with the agent.

"Surpassing is the better word, Colonel," said Corpaz.

Gerane was standing at the little window when the guard threw open the door to admit Starcourt. She turned her face

toward him. The light from without fell upon it. She was not smiling. Instead, her eyes were sad, wistful, even reproachful, and there were dark circles under them. Her red lips were tremulous.

"I cannot permit you to do it, Gavan," she began rapidly, stretching out her hand to check him as he approached. "You must not think of—"

. . . Presently he released her and held her off at arm's length. Her eyes were blurred with tears, her cheeks wet and little sobs came from her parted lips. She was a very tender, helpless, utterly feminine little captive, after all. His heart exulted.

"The fifteenth of March isn't anywhere near as far off as it was an hour ago, Gerane," he said.

THE END